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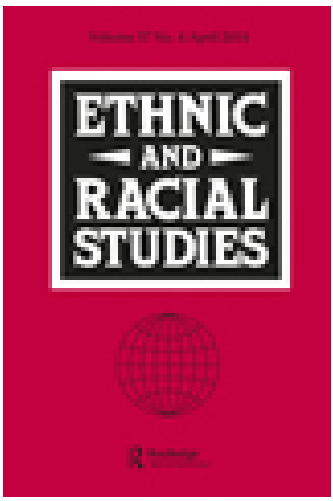

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The end of late-generation European ethnicity in America?

Herbert J. Gans

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Exploring late-generation ethnicity automatically raises a long-ignored question: whether it will end and how: through what terminal stages and processes? In America, this question currently makes sense only for late-generation descendants of the European immigration wave that lasted roughly from the 1870s to 1924. However, answering it prepares the ground for eventually asking it also about late-generation ethnics in newer waves of immigration.

Keywords: ethnicity; late-generation ethnicity; ethnicity and religion; identity; terminal ethnic identity

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American immigration scholars have paid little attention to the possibility that ethnicity could someday end, although it has been doing so since the first immigrants arrived in this country and became colonials and later Americans. In the process they eventually also became what I will call native-borns, who think of themselves solely as Americans.

Currently, the ending process has been going on among the descendants of the European immigration that took place between the 1870s and 1924: the people described here as late generation ethnics (LGEs hereafter). By now, many and perhaps most are the product of several generations of ethnic intermarriage; have little memory, if any, of their immigrant origins; and have not made any use of the ethnic social structures and cultures of their ancestors. Some will retain what I call a terminal identity for a yet unknown period.

What holds for the users of ethnic structures and cultures also holds for the suppliers, the various organizations, agencies, commercial firms and other social bodies that supplied the practices, symbols and other social raw materials for LGEs and earlier generations. A few will survive as long as some constituents, audiences and customers still come, and then find new opportunities or also close up shop.

Ending theories

The first modern assimilation theorists were busy studying the changes in the lives of immigrants and of the next generation. Thus, they had no reason to think about whether what came to be called ethnicity would ever end. However, they apparently all assumed that the people they were studying would eventually become Americans,

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and in the process suggested several possible ending theories, although almost entirely by implication.

One theory, associated particularly with Robert Park, was amalgamation, which suggested that the immigrants would, through intermarriage, join or fuse with the by now long-term native-borns (e.g. Park 1914). That theory survives in today's notion that the immigrants and their descendants have helped to transform the previously dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant mainstream even as it transformed them.

A second theory, which originated in the eighteenth century, proposed that eventually, the descendants of the newcomers and earlier native-borns would melt into a single exceptional American who embodied all the positive qualities of all the people, or at least of all whites who had come to America since it became a nation. In its most famous formulation, by the playwright Israel Zangwill (1909), these populations were immersed in a melting pot that eradicated all the distinguishing characteristics of those who found themselves in the metaphorical pot.

The third theory, by Warner and Srole (1945), indirectly forecast an end to ethnicity. In developing their generational model of assimilation, the two sociologists created a timetable consisting of three criteria, the first of which was 'the time it takes for an entire group to disappear' (Warner and Srole 1945, 289.)[1]

The flowering of empirical social science research and publication opportunities after the Second World War increased the number of researchers with an investment in ethnicity and no incentive to consider its ending. Then came the so-called ethnic revival of the l960s and the beginning of the post-1965 immigration. Many researchers turned their attention to the latest arrivals and from then on, but with some notable exceptions (e.g. Alba 1990; Steinberg 2001; Waters 1990), the later-generation descendants of the European immigration were virtually ignored. Nonetheless, even before the end of the twentieth century, it seemed likely that the LGEs themselves had disappeared or would eventually do so. Languages and cultures have always become extinct, although we associate extinctions with pre-literal tribes, without recognizing that they also happen in developed societies.

The people whom Alba (1985) described as being in the twilight of ethnicity had inherited too many ancestries through intermarriage or no longer found ethnicity to be relevant to their lives. One generation later, their children, whom I described as entering the coming darkness of ethnicity (Gans 2014), may still have displayed an occasional interest in a symbolic or other ethnic activity or two. However, as they or their children encounter fewer and fewer like-minded others, and the suppliers of ethnicity shrink and then close their doors, their ethnicity will eventually become extinct. To be sure, later immigration waves of the same national origin will maintain their own version of that ethnicity until they too turn into LGEs and repeat the extinction process.

Still, even the total disappearance of the current LGEs may take a quite a while. Although they will no longer be visible on the national scene, a few will survive locally everywhere, perhaps even into the tenth generation, such as the Germans, Scandinavians and others who began to arrive in the USA about 160 years ago. Subsequently, when any evidence of late-generation ethnic social and cultural life is gone, material remains of one kind or another will be preserved. Some ethnic art

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works, artefacts, books and other memorabilia will be acquired by general museums and nationalized to become part of the national museum culture.

Terminal ethnic identity

Perhaps the most interesting final stage of late-generation ethnicity (LGE hereafter) will be an individual one. Even after LGEs have given up all other manifestations of ethnicity, some, perhaps only a small proportion, will maintain a sporadic or occasional identity. The expression of that identity will usually be only of momentary length, and also will probably be a terminal one.

I think of terminal ethnic identity as a partially self-constructed one that people can create on their own from a variety of social sources. It might be *invoked*, perhaps as a sudden remembrance of a favourite ancestor or the memory of a treasured ethnic ceremony. More often, however, terminal ethnic identity is likely to be *evoked* by events, such as meeting a co-ethnic childhood friend, or the celebration of an anniversary, whether of an ancestor or a long-ago co-ethnic leader. Since terminal identities are personal creations, the evoking incident could even be a Hollywood actor playing a co-ethnic hero in an action movie.

Whether invoked or evoked, stimuli for the terminal ethnic identity are apt to be situated in the past, and more often than not will be nostalgic. Conversely, LGEs who still bear identifiable ethnic names and are therefore so identified by strangers might be reminded of past discriminatory episodes or old stereotypes involving their ethnicities. In fact, ethnic groups that are racialized or discriminated against on religious or other grounds often develop a defensive identity that persists into and beyond LGE. It can survive the ending of most other expressions of LGE, and can lead to continuing reminders of possible discriminatory threats.

Not only is the terminal ethnic identity socially constructed out of old materials, but it has to be socially shared to some extent; that is, individual terminal identities must make sense to co-ethnics, and perhaps also to others. If it were purely individual, persons mentioning it would be looked at askance and thought of, or even shunned, as eccentrics.

In 1991, Bakalian described an early version of the terminal ethnic identity when she wrote:

> For American born generations, Armenian is a preference and Armenianness is a state of mind…. One can say he or she is an Armenian without speaking Armenian, marrying an Armenian, doing business with Armenians, belonging to an Armenian church, joining Armenian voluntary associations or participating in the events and activities sponsored by such organizations. (Bakalian 1991, as quoted in Nagel 1994, 154.)

Studying the end of LGE

Endings are not easy to study, since they are only apparent ex post facto once the object of study has disappeared. Endings are also not cheerful objects of study, unless they are the endings of evils, like wars or poverty. Perhaps that is one reason why

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sociology has neglected the topic; even the sociology of death seems to have vanished from the discipline's research agenda. In fact, there may be an unwritten scholarly taboo against considering the end of what one has been studying and the field or subfield in which one has made a career. But then almost no one wants to think about going out of business.

These obstacles notwithstanding, the end of LGE can be studied, since it is likely to occur eventually in many of the places where ethnic populations, practices, institutions and organizations are in the process of disappearing.[2] Interviews, including of panels, as well as ethnographic and community study methods would enable researchers to observe the terminal stages of ethnicity and its various components. Interviews in communities in which LGE is known to be declining could be done to learn whether, when and how the individual, familial and communal ending process begins. In which generation does it begin and end, and what sets off the decline: intermarriage, the birth of children, upward or residential mobility, or what? Which LGEs leave their ethnicity behind earliest and who is slowest and why? What ethnic components are given up first and which persevere the longest? Or does ethnicity end without anyone paying special attention or even noticing it?

Similar kinds of questions could be asked at the organizational and communal level. In addition, one would want to know whether organizations and cultures look for ways to postpone endings; and whether they find or invent special rituals to mark endings when they are near or actually come. Also, one can ask which LGEs maintain some organizational or cultural connections until the end, the most loyal ethnics, or the loneliest ones who meet their social needs in organizations. Do the last people on the ethnic ship seek to save themselves, and how; do the survivors mourn, and do their activities resemble other kinds of mourning?

Even if no traces of ethnicity are left, researchers should look for evidence of what might be called post-terminal behaviour. They could investigate the possible presence of LGEs in activities and organizations of co-ethnics who arrived after 1965; they should also consider the possibility that some LGEs join or invent pan-ethnic groups, such as all-Scandinavian or all-Slavic ones.[3] Commercial enterprises are more flexible than social or cultural organizations, and can easily reinvent themselves as pan-ethnic. If Scandinavian restaurants exist in the community, researchers can find out if they were once Danish or Swedish or Norwegian. The same strategy can be followed in studying pan-ethnic fairs and festivals, although in many communities, LGE and pan-ethnic festivals may be taken over by non-ethnic commercial firms.

Studies can also be done in other commercial firms. The products of ethnic food companies are frequently absorbed into the mainstream diet long before LGE, but one can ask whether and how long originally ethnic foods survive the demise of the ethnic group menu from which they were taken. Sicilian-style pizza will surely survive until long after Sicilian American LGE has ended, although that pizza will bear no resemblance to the original ethnic product.

Firms that produce popular entertainment act in much the same way. They often introduce ethnic characters and situations while parts of immigrant culture are still alive and can be used to create the ethnic stereotypes that resonate with non-ethnic

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audiences. However, one day a researcher will be able to check to see whether Mafia characters show up on screens even after the Italian American Mafia is long gone.

Another kind of study looks at what mainstream culture retains after the ending of various ethnic groups. For example, researchers could check museums, especially of Americana, folklore and folk art, but even art museums dedicated to the exhibition of high art, to see whether they have chosen or retained ethnic materials for immortalization as national museum culture, and if so which were chosen and rejected, and why.

Research into ethnicity's endings must never forget that America often describes itself as a nation of immigrants. Consequently, descendants of the early arrivals could be asked to discuss whether and how they perceive their long-ago ethnicity and its ending. Those who belong to the Sons/Daughters of the American Revolution and similar organizations, and obtain prestige from celebrating their ancestors, would make especially interesting interviewees.

However, descendants from later and less prestigious immigrations can be interviewed as well. They might also be asked whether and how they have used the now widely available ancestral history data as well as genetic testing results to explore their past ethnicity (Waters 2014). Even people who question or reject the validity or reliability of such data might provide further insights into how ethnicities end.

Studying terminal ethnic identity

Identity is one of too many slippery and difficult-to-operationalize social science concepts with which empirical researchers have to contend. It is also hard to visualize since it operates partly inside people's heads, can be turned on and off easily, and may even lie dormant in mental storage until brought out by a researcher's question.

In the absence of constant and enduring emphasis on ethnic identity, such as the defensive identity that is second nature to members of racial and ethnic groups subject to prejudice, discrimination and physical attack, LGE identity is apt to be an ephemeral reality. Sometimes, it may even be little more than a label.

For empirical purposes, I think of ethnic identity as a felt connection to a constructed or imagined collectivity, which may or may not resemble an empirically verifiable ethnic collectivity. This conception permits investigating the quality, intensity and duration of the feeling, the actual or imagined collectivity to which it is attached and even the kinds of attachment to the collectivity that people construct or imagine for their identity.

As best I can tell, studies of ethnic identity generally assume that all or most ethnics possess an ethnic identity. Consequently, interviewers may ask their respondents their identity. In that case, respondents, other than the offspring of multi-intermarried ancestors, cannot easily deny that they have an ethnic identity even though privately they may think of it as a label attached to them by others.

Instead, LGEs should first be asked whether they have an ethnic identity, but even the question suggests that yes is the publicly desired answer. Telling interviewees that many or most of their generation no longer have such an identity might produce more accurate answers. Probes about the characteristics of that identity must not put ideas – or

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remembered stereotypes – into interviewees' heads, and they should be asked how often and how intensely they feel their identity.

Ethnic identities are expressed in actions and feelings, but LGEs probably stick almost entirely to feelings. For students of terminal identity, the nature and objects of those feelings, and what invoked or evoked situations produced them, should be a major topic of study. The primary feeling is likely to be ethnic pride. Other typical feelings are pleasure and memory, including nostalgia, but negative feelings may survive too: shame, hate, anger and remembered injustices among them. The objects towards which such feelings are directed can be legion, enabling researchers to code for types, whether of individuals or collectivities, whether real or imagined, and ancestral or national, among others.

Terminal ethnic identities also need to be studied, but unless researchers chance upon people about to give up those identities, they have to be studied ex post facto. Research in neighbourhoods and other places once identified as ethnic might find people who could be asked whether, when and how they gave up their ethnic identities.[4]

Since researchers distinguish between people's identities and their identification by others, those studying terminal ethnic identities should also check the existence of terminal identifications. LGEs may be identified as ethnics by others after they themselves have stopped invoking or evoking their ethnic identity, but the identification by others may evoke a momentary revival of that identity.

These others can be individuals or organizations, including census, research and public agencies or commercial firms with interests in or curiosity about LGEs. As students of census research know, questions about ethnicity and even question wording can bring out such momentary revivals, although probably of ethnic labels as often as of ethnic identities.

The post-1965 immigration waves

The above observations and hypotheses should also apply, all other things being equal, to the descendants of the several post-1965 immigration waves when they become LGEs. The stages and processes operating among today's LGEs should be duplicated among the newer immigrants, even though the America into which they are being absorbed differs from that of the earlier European immigrants.

However, since the children of the post-1965 waves are likely to be intermarried earlier than their predecessors, the institutions and practices that their ancestors brought with them may die out faster. Thus, the conditions associated with LGE may begin earlier than it did among the long-ago European immigrants.

These hunches will not apply to future LGEs whom whites have racialized. Although they may have also shed most of their ethnicity, they will retain a racial identity – and a defensive one – as long as they are identified by whites as non-whites. Whether they are demonized or treated as model minorities, intensive and extensive othering, especially that involving discrimination, will keep defensive racial identities alive. In addition, as the Back to Africa, Black Power, African culture and other African American movements suggest, racial demonization may also revive old or create new ethnic identities as well as institutions, practices and symbols.

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How long racialized ethnics maintain their racial identity depends largely on the decisions of the white population, at least as long it dominates the country's racial framing process. These decisions are likely to be affected by their feelings about particular non-white minorities. Conversely, if current demographic trends –and racial definitions – continue and whites actually become a minority population in mid-century America, they may themselves develop the overt racial identity that they have so far not often sought, wanted or needed.[5] In that case, America's racial hierarchy – and perhaps its entire racial vocabulary – may change in now unpredictable ways.

Still, whites may continue to other non-whites, and more intensely than before even as they themselves become a racial minority. In that case, whites will probably be more focused on their whiteness, and their ability to hold on to their share of white economic, political and cultural power.

Even before the post-1965 waves have turned into LGEs, new waves of immigration will have arrived and will continue to arrive. In a global economy and polity, where later waves will come from cannot be predicted. For all we know now, at some point they may once again include large numbers of white Europeans.

Some general questions

The apparent end of late-generation European ethnicity offers the opportunity to raise four research questions about ethnicity in general.

One question is whether and how the final ethnic melting predicted long ago will take place. Will post-LGEs blend into a single mainstream, or into several– and if so, how will these differ from each other, culturally, structurally and of course normatively? More important, will the concept of mainstream still make sense, since white Protestant Americans stopped constituting the major or even sole mainstream long ago? Most important, can the existence and nature of mainstreams be ascertained empirically?

A second question deserving of study pertains to the boundary-setting function of ethnicity and its aftermath (Brubaker 2014; Jenkins 2014). Will ethnicity, particularly white ethnicity, still be used for boundary making or will it be entirely replaced by race, and indirectly by class? One could even ask whether class will finally become a more overt boundary maker. This possibility might be hastened if America continues to become economically yet more unequal; and if America can find an acceptable visible indicator of class position.

Third, the end of LGE justifies asking why turn-of-the-nineteenth-century European ethnicity lasted as long as it did; or to put it another way, why did European national-origin identifications and identities persist through several native-born generations? One might want to ask first, why did America attach national-origin labels to people whose immigrant ancestors often did not know about or wish to be connected with their European country of origin. This research question is all the more interesting because official and unofficial labellings of the post-1965 immigration have largely replaced national origins with continental ones, Latin American, Asian and African being the most prominent.[6] Undoubtedly, today's immigrants still identify with their national origins, but the second and later generations will either use the continental labels or just

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call themselves Americans. Whether symbolic attachment to a continent is deemed to constitute ethnicity is a subject for future study.

The fourth question is comparative: do the observations and hypotheses about the end of ethnicity in America apply to Europe and other countries on the planet? Ethnicity here and elsewhere are very different even if they are described with the same term. For comparative purposes, the most important difference may be between countries that encourage their immigrants to assimilate and become native-borns, and those that seek to keep them separate, inferior and subject to discrimination.

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Ethnicity and religion

Ethnicity is secular and bears no intrinsic relation to religion except in countries with state religions able to control some of the population's secular activities and practices. However, even where state and church are separate, ethnicity and religion are connected in various direct and indirect ways. Consequently, a comprehensive look at the end of LGE should include side glances at religion.[7] Such glances are best taken by sociologists of religion. Therefore, this paper will limit itself to four relevant end-related phenomena: existential change; the distinctiveness of some immigrant religions; worship in immigrant languages; and the Americanization of originally ethnic or foreign religions.

Existential change

Probably the first assimilatory religious moves by immigrants were involuntary, demanded by the necessity to survive in a new country. The best example may be Orthodox Jewish immigrants having to give up the observance of the Sabbath because they had to work Saturdays in order to keep their jobs. Some Jewish immigrants were able to find jobs in their ethnic enclaves, where they could continue to practise their religions; others returned to their countries of origin for the same reason. The majority bowed to the economic imperative, and the observant among them went to the synagogue on Friday night.

Immigrant religions

Most of the 1870–1924 European immigrants were Catholics and Jews, and since they were mainly peasants and small-town people, their religious beliefs, practices and organizations reflected the localities and regions from which they came. Consequently, these diverged in some respects from the Catholicism and Judaism of America's native-borns. Thus, Southern Italian immigrants who had been used to their region's Marian Catholicism, which gave special emphasis to the Virgin Mary, had to get used to the dominant American Catholicism.

Worship in immigrant languages

American places of worship in areas where the turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrants settled often provided foreign language services for varying periods, depending on how quickly worshippers were willing and able to understand English.

Americanization of originally foreign religions

Since all American religions other than those of Native Americans originated elsewhere, most, with some notable exceptions, assimilated in ways that are remarkably similar to ethnic assimilation processes (Gans 1994). Generalizing too broadly, over the centuries, these places of worship have come ever nearer to a basic Protestant congregational model, in which attendance is voluntary and the congregation slowly takes at least some decision-making power away from the central religious bureaucracy and from the professional religious who control it.

End of ethnicity studies should therefore pay some attention to the demise of ethnic places of worship, whether they provide immigrant or American forms of worship. Such research would also provide an opportunity to compare ethnicity and religion.

Ethnicity and religion are both institutions with organized belief systems, but religion appeals to more intensely held beliefs and values. As a result, one would imagine that immigrant religions would persist longer than ethnicities, but in fact, most seem to have disappeared more quickly. Marian Catholicism may not have survived for more than two generations and the forms of Balkan Orthodox Catholicism and some Central European Protestant denominations not much longer.

Several hypotheses about the brevity of their survival can be suggested. First, not only the religions that immigrants brought with them, but also those that they encountered in America, were centralized bureaucracies with monopoly power. As a result, they were able to decide when to undertake the formal Americanization of local places of worship. Further, unlike secular ethnic institutions, religions also have to construct and maintain buildings and meet staff payrolls. Thus, endings are hastened if and when funds, including congregants' donations, become scarce or unavailable. Secular ethnic organizations can survive on much lower budgets. In addition, religious worship is place-based and when congregants want and can afford to become residentially mobile, places of worship must often move too. True, old buildings can usually be sold to new arrivals in the old neighbourhood, but moving to neighbourhoods that are not immigrant or second-generation ethnic enclaves also speeds up religious assimilation.

By the time they had become LGEs, religious worship had become increasingly voluntary even in religions that demanded regular attendance. Historians could study whether and how ethnics persuaded their places of worship to start resembling the Protestant churches of the native-born, although the development of what might be called late-generation religiosity should be studied by sociologists of religion.

Those unwilling to assimilate had to isolate themselves in communities with guarded borders, the Chassidim and Amish being the most prominent successful examples. Moreover, even when worshippers have switched to Americanized religion, professional religious can keep immigrant theologies and rituals alive for themselves in institutions that serve only them. Marian Catholicism still survives, but in places such as seminaries.

Today, religion itself seems to be on the decline all over the so-called modern world, losing not only worshippers but also believers. The decline is slower in America than in Europe, but while orthodox, fundamentalist and evangelical religions continue to flourish, liberal religions or denominations are shrinking. The American

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decline of religion seems to take two major forms. One is the departure from organized religion only, with belief in the deity and some at-home religious practices continuing. Others head for various kinds of spiritualism. The second form of decline is more drastic: a literal ending of religion, with rising numbers of those surrendering their religious beliefs beginning to call themselves agnostics or atheists.So far the numbers in both forms of decline remain small. Thus, national surveys report that while about 20% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, some are still believers in a deity.[8] However, most of the unaffiliated, and about 15% of Americans altogether say that they are no longer religious (Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project 2012). They are sometimes called non-theists. The number of non-theist Jews is a little higher (22%), but it is also increasing, with a third of Jews born after 1980 indicating that they are not religious (Keysar 2010; Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project 2013). In fact, researchers have created a special term for people who consider themselves to be Jewish even if non-religious: 'Jews of No Religion.' Most of these respondents describe themselves as Jewish by ancestry, but not by ethnicity; in fact they are less ethnic than religious believers (Phillips 2010).[9] The 2013 Pew study of American Jews gave respondents a list of items thought essential to being Jewish, but only one, eating traditional Jewish foods, was in any sense ethnic, and only 9% of respondents considered that essential (Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project 2013, Appendix B, Q.E5g,169). What respondents considered most essential was remembrance of the Holocaust, with 60% offering this response (Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project 2013, Appendix B, Q.E5a, 167). These data suggest the possibility that Jews of No Religion are mainly Jews by Identity, and especially by defensive identity. If and when anti-Semitism and the threat of anti-Semitism are eliminated, they could become Jews by Terminal Identity.

Coda

Everything we study and write is time bound. Therefore, while thinking about the possible end of ethnicity in America, it is worth considering that if and when global warming begins to approach human boiling points, huge numbers of people escaping life-threatening heat and deadly flooding are likely to head for this country. The newcomers are apt to be called invaders rather than immigrants, and will be received very differently than past immigrants. The sociologists of that time may look back nostalgically to the days when their ancestors were studying the end of ethnicity.

Notes

1. Warner and Srole thought of disappearance as being fully accepted by the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, the dominant native-borns of the town that they studied. They did not discuss whether the accepted groups would retain some ethnic characteristics.
2. They can also be studied retroactively, and probably best in America's small towns, where tiny ethnic groups disappeared long before they could become LGEs, either because there were too few people for a functioning community or the young people left town. Also, the native-borns may have demanded speedier Americanization than those in the cities.

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3. In the 1960s, second- and third-generation descendants of the European immigration created a short-lived social movement that opposed the federal war on poverty's emphasis on African Americans. For political reasons, they downplayed their national origins and became known as white ethnics.
4. Place-based studies could also revive the old Chicago School concept of areas of ethnic settlement, beginning with the first or immigrant area, but aiming to trace the nth and last such areas. The last ones might be fruitful places for studying the endings of ethnicity and ethnic identity.
5. Actually, whites have always maintained a racial identity whenever they lived with or amid African Americans, especially in the South.
6. To be sure, these are all racialized populations but initially so were the Southern and Eastern Europeans who were labelled by national origins.
7. One could even ask whether when and how ethnicity becomes a kind of religion and religion, a kind of ethnicity.
8. The number who describe themselves as affiliated must be taken with a large grain of salt, since their claimed attendance at religious services may be as much as double that of actual attendance (Hadaway and Marler 2005).
9. While it is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of this population consists of LGEs, empirical research to test this assumption is needed.

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