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A RESPONSE TO JOHN STONE AND KELSEY HARRIS



Another look at symbolic ethnicity

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I am pleased not only that *Ethnic and Racial Studies* chose to remember a nearly forty-year-old article, but also that it is evidently continuing to be read. And as a researcher, I am equally pleased that an ageing empirically derived concept still seems to be relevant.

John Stone's and Kelsey Harris's complimentary and wide-ranging commentary also discussed my later writing on ethnicity. For this reason, much of their commentary is about ethnicity rather than symbolic ethnicity (SE). My response will follow this pattern as well, although I cannot comment on all the topics they discuss.

SE, acculturation and assimilation

Looking back, I would now argue that SE may be a regular stage in the acculturation process. It is also a significant stage. Nearly 40 years after I wrote my 1979 article, we know much better what comes after SE for it appears to signal the beginning of the end for ethnicity. Thus, my more recent articles on the coming darkness and the end of ethnicity (Gans 2014, 2015a) could be read as sequels to the original presentation of SE.

It may even be possible to sketch a set of acculturation stages, beginning with various levels of practiced stages, followed by symbolic and terminal ones before the ethnic group disappears.

The end of ethnicity could, however, be put off for a long time, by post-symbolic stages, when ethnicity is remembered in museums, by institutions of higher education, especially those with donated professorial chairs, by tourist agencies serving the especially nostalgic, and now non-ethnic populations.

The end of ethnicity could also be reversed, at least temporarily, by groups which try to reinvent it.

Acculturation itself should be viewed primarily as a predictable adaptation to, as well as an exploitation of, opportunities in a new social environment that is often essential to the survival of all newcomers, not just immigrants.¹

Most newcomers to the United States, especially white skinned ones have been free to acculturate with fairly few constraints. Some were and still are under pressure to Americanize immediately, while others were able to acculturate publicly but maintain their ethnic loyalties and practices privately.

But the acculturation of poorer and nonwhite newcomers has generally been limited by financial and other obstacles, for example, the inability to afford the prevailing standard of living and by the social exclusion that accompanies segregation and discrimination.

Conversely, assimilation differs from acculturation. I think it should be viewed as the newcomers' acceptance into the mainstream America populated by long-term native borns. That acceptance often requires permission to enter, which can be denied or postponed.

My view of SE has not changed. It is marked by a departure from most of the practiced ethnic culture, as well as from the formal ethnic organizations and the community in which these are embedded.² At the same time, SE is a move from acting to feeling ethnic, which emphasizes identity instead of practising the culture and participating in its organizations.

As a result, SE enables people not only to begin the final stages of acculturation, but also to move towards acceptance into mainstream American life.

Moreover, feeling ethnic can be an occasional impulse which does not interfere with the everyday life of the generations whose ethnicity is symbolic. Finding ways of expressing ethnic identity feelings and learning to maintain some form of ethnic identity can be a leisure time activity, thus adding variety to the routines of everyday life.

In effect, feeling ethnic is achieved by employing ethnic objects, material and nonmaterial, as well as symbols. Actually, the objects are themselves used as symbols to express ethnic feelings, one reason I called the entire process SE.³

Ethnic feelings can be expressed in many ways, including occasional returns to ethnic culture and participation in ethnic organizations. They can be expressed by visiting ethnic restaurants, exhibitions, traditional memorials, and music or dance festivals, the ancestral country and the community of origin. By now, ethnic social media and other websites are also available.

Ethnic feelings could be further expressed by celebrating famous co-ethnics, whether entertainers, athletes, artists, writers and others.

Objects that invoke ethnic feelings can include family heirlooms, nostalgic writing, museum exhibitions and perhaps most often, ethnic foodstuffs.

Nonetheless, all of the symbols and objects are occasional means for maintaining a connection to ethnic identity. That connection may even be emotional, but it is usually transitory and rarely long lasting.

That connection undoubtedly declines with the further acculturation of each succeeding generation, as does the number of symbols and objects. Conversely, new ones may appear if waves of newcomers from the old country have overwhelmed the culture of the earlier immigrants.⁴

A rereading of my 1979 article suggests that it has aged pretty well. I would now raise questions about its intergenerational sustainability, at least among the descendants of the European immigration who served as my data source. One reason for raising questions: rates of ethnic intermarriage are so high that as early as 1976 Richard Alba could find few marriage partners with the same ethnicity among American Catholic ethnics.

However, fieldwork among the intermarried may discover that they each maintain bits of ethnic identity through symbolic forms. They may even present ethnic objects to their children, particularly while they are trying to decide which ethnicity, if any, they will try to pass on to them.

Ethnicity and race

Stone and Harris suggest that my “writings on symbolic ethnicity need to be addressed within the broader debates about the nature of American racial, ethnic, religious and national relations”.

However, I continue to think of SE as a purely ethnic phenomenon and as a concept for a better understanding of the acculturation process, with only an infrequent and often incidental relevance to those broader debates.

To begin with, my 1979 article did not discuss nonwhite acculturation because my empirical research, like that of most immigration researchers at that time, had been limited to the descendants of the 1880–1924 European immigration. Their host country may have originally described them as swarthy races, but by the third generation they had been transformed into white ethnics.

Furthermore, while Stone and Harris conflate race and ethnicity, I believe the two are very different and have to be understood and analysed separately. Once Americanization has taken hold, ethnicity is up to the ethnics. They have leeway in how to acculturate and how much, and by the third generation if not before, they can change their ethnicity or give it up entirely.

Conversely, race is assigned by racial dominants (read whites). It cannot be shed by those designated as nonwhites, and cannot be altered until whites decide to do so.

Even so, nonwhite immigrants are also ethnics. They bring national and other cultures with them. They also acculturate, drop ethnic practices and organizations and then limit their ethnicity to occasional ethnic feelings invoked through SE.

This description fits most of the newcomers who are part of the post 1965 and still continuing immigration. Even if they are labelled as Latinos or Asian

Americans, they differ in national origins. Peruvians vary from Mexicans and Koreans are not Chinese.

Consequently, their acculturation is as much a part of ethnic research as the acculturation of whites. Furthermore, research of their third and later generations should explore whether and how they experience SE. However, that research must also look at how their racial designations impact their SE, and the ways in which it might diverge from the SE of whites.

Even former slaves brought ethnic cultures and organizations with them, one reason they are now called African Americans. However, initially they were forced to give them up at least overtly and acculturate publicly to plantation culture. At the same time, they were strictly isolated from the rest of American society.

Once emancipated they had to adapt to a society that imposed segregation, discrimination and all the exclusionary and deprecatory mechanisms that white America is still inflicting on them.

Subsequently, their eventual freedom to acculturate into white American culture encouraged creative individuals to produce Americanized forms of racial and ethnic music, art, humour and other forms of entertainment and enlightenment. Ironically enough, some of these became standard cultural fare for the same white America that continued to segregate and discriminate against them.

In the last half century, some African Americans have been inventing new versions of old ethnic cultures. This distinguishes them in some respects from whites, most of whose ancestors came to America voluntarily and who have little interest in their ancestral cultures other than as tools for feeling ethnic.

Ethnicity and religion

Stone and Harris rightly point out my neglect of religion in my initial article about SE. However, I wanted to emphasize my main theme, and as a result, I did not even mention that my original discovery of SE dates back to the 1950s and actually dealt with religion rather than ethnicity.⁵

In an article about American Jewry (Gans 1956), I described the emerging departure among young Jews of the second generation from their religious culture and religious organizations. At the same time, their social life was almost entirely limited to other Jews.

I also noted their primary concern with their children's Jewish identity, in part to assure the survival of the Jewish community. For this and other reasons, they used Jewish objects and symbols as substitutes for ancestral religious practice, all of which I summarized as symbolic Judaism.

In the years that followed my 1979 article, I discovered that the organizational structures of the synagogues serving second and later generation Jews were beginning to resemble those of liberal Protestant American

churches. In addition, these Jewish cohorts were increasingly celebrating religious holidays at home and moving away also from the secular components of the formal Jewish community.⁶

Similar changes were taking place in parts of the Protestant and Catholic communities, and to make a long story short, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* published my article suggesting the emergence of symbolic religiosity alongside SE (Gans 1994).

This article also briefly hinted at possible similarities between ethnic and religious acculturation, and I now think that it may be possible to study stages of religious acculturation, at least among ethnic groups which bring their religions with them from their country of origin.

Jews may be different from other ethnic groups. Perhaps they should not even be called ethnic groups since they have been a primarily religious community in which ethnicity as I define it plays a relatively minor role.

Today, that religious community survives in large part because it still serves community maintaining functions. Many scholars argue that these functions justify describing Jews an ethnic group. However, my narrower definition of ethnicity, and the social as well as cultural characteristics of that community suggest that it is neither ethnic nor religious. Perhaps it should be described as the ever-more dominant secular Jewish community that exists alongside the religious one.

What is left of Jewish ethnicity, at least by my definition, are Americanized versions of the various national, regional and local cultures of the peoples among whom Jews were living before they came to the United States. By now, Jewish ethnicity is becoming a virtual oxymoron.

After writing my 1994 article, I paid no further attention to religion and ethnicity until 2013, when the Pew Research Center released its study of American Jewry (Pew 2013). What interested me most was its finding that about a fifth of the sample, and a third of its young adults practised no religion, suggesting a dramatic development in the departure from religion I had written about earlier.

The Pew Research Center described that portion of its study sample as Jews of No Religion. That made me wonder why and how they still considered themselves Jews, what ingredients went into their Jewish identity and what made them feel Jewish.

The article that I wrote to satisfy my curiosity (Gans 2015b) reported that nearly two thirds of the Jews of No Religion considered themselves Jews by ancestry, which suggested that they were still Jewish only or mainly because of their parentage. Since 54 per cent of them also indicated that being Jewish was not important to them, many Jews of No Religion may have only a minimal Jewish identity.

Whatever the intensity of their identity, the Pew Research Center study also provided some slight evidence for ingredients of that identity. When Jews of

No Religion were asked what they thought essential to remaining Jewish, 60 per cent mentioned the remembrance of the Holocaust, which may also express the continuing Jewish fear of anti-Semitism. That remembrance may help as well to maintain the formal and informal Jewish community, particularly its secular components.

Conversely, only 9 per cent felt that eating traditional Jewish foods was essential, another indication of the minor role of ethnicity in American Jewry.

Writing this paper also made me wonder whether the end of late-generation ethnicity might someday be complemented by a parallel ending of religiosity among America's many liberal religions and denominations. Signs of declining attendance at Christian churches and the rising emphasis on a few major holidays suggest such a possibility.

These religions, and perhaps religion in general may also become less capable to help people deal with some of the more dramatic problems in American life, even as they become less relevant for everyday life in an increasingly secularized society.

Religion can do little to affect the still rising economic inequality, the seemingly continuing stagnation of the economy, the shrinkage of secure and good jobs brought on in part by computerization and the world's economic globalization.

Religion is also incapable of helping people cope with the country's ideological and political polarization, the conservative attack on the welfare state, and the widespread downward mobility brought about by these and other problems.

True, the current decline of religion is accompanied by the persistence of a dramatic rise in orthodox religions. American religion could thus become a bimodal institution.

Ethnicity and American exceptionalism

Once upon a time, America was exceptional, because it was a nation of immigrants at a time when most equally developed European countries were still ethnically homogeneous.

However, in today's globalized world, Europe has also become both ethnically and racially diverse. As in the United States, the previously numerically and otherwise dominant population is unhappy, particularly of course with the poorer and darker skinned newcomers, wishing they would leave or could be deported.

Meanwhile, these newcomers are often victims of discrimination, segregation and all the other harmful effects of racialization. In many countries, the Muslims Zolberg and Woon (1999) equated with Mexicans are now frequently being viewed as a dangerous class, and sometimes treated almost as if they were blacks.

Today's Europeans may have more difficulty tolerating cultural differences between themselves and the newcomers than Americans. In some respects, Europe is still where the United States stood in the late nineteenth century, when White Anglo Saxon Protestants and other white Northern Europeans were confronted by the arrival of Eastern and Southern European immigrants.

However, the mostly Catholic and Jewish newcomers were also discriminated against because of their religions and national origins. Some were treated as badly as today's Muslim refugees, falsely accused of being revolutionaries, anarchists and communists, as well as of a variety of nonpolitical crimes.

The racism and rising nationalism of Europe's white population may also persuade the newcomers to maintain their ethnic practices and organizations and to find comfort in their ethnic solidarity.

As a result, Western Europe's ethnics may not be acculturating as quickly as the late nineteenth century immigrants to the United States. Still, by the fourth generation if not earlier, at least some of the European ethnics, probably the economically and otherwise more fortunate ones, will have acculturated sufficiently to turn their ethnicity into a symbolic one.

To be sure, people kept in refugee camps for generations will be sufficiently isolated from their hosts' culture to acculturate. In addition, dictatorships will be able to put a variety of obstacles in the way of the refugees' acculturation if they choose to do so.

New futures

In periods of social stability and economic growth, we sometimes forget that our findings and even our concepts are time-bound, and that dramatic changes in society can quickly invalidate them.

If the later decades of the present century will bring on the climatic and related planetary upheavals now being predicted, these could lead to new epidemics, ever-more massive migration movements, further civil and other wars and a variety of other disasters.

They in turn could lead to a further growth in orthodox religions and the emergence of new religions that try to respond to these events. More intense nationalisms could revive old ethnic identities and even create new ethnic groups. In that case, SE might become a historical oddity.

Notes

1. Acculturation can also be used to describe changes in social environments other than immigration. For example, when recent PhDs start their teaching careers, they must acculturate from the graduate student to the junior faculty culture.

2. I follow Swidler's (1986) conception of culture, as a summarizing term to describe the tools we use to adapt, flourish in and conquer the social and other environments in which we live.
3. I use the broad conception of symbol I learned in W. Lloyd Warner's classes at the University of Chicago.
4. We ethnicity researchers must remember that we may have a greater vested interest in ethnicity than even the immigrants we study.
5. I also wrote a longer version of the 1979 ERS article, which added empirical observations based on what I had observed about Jewish religious behaviour (Gans 1979).
6. Much of what I learned then came from research, which is still continuing, on the changes in American Jewish life conducted by Cohen (1983, 1988).

Disclosure statement

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