

SYMPOSIUM

The coming darkness of late-generation European American ethnicity

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This paper hypothesizes about what is happening to the ethnic structures and cultures of the fourth-, fifth- and later-generation descendants of the European immigrants who came to America between about 1870 and 1924. The paper's main hypothesis is that late-generation European ethnicity is disappearing, although vestiges will probably always remain. However, immigration researchers have done little to study these late-generation populations, and the paper therefore describes some of the studies that could and should be undertaken.

Keywords: late-generation ethnics; ethnic identity; ethnic practices; ethnic organizations; symbolic ethnicity

Introduction

In 1985, Richard Alba (1985) published a book about Italian Americans subtitled *Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*. He was writing about the third and fourth generations of the Italian immigrants who arrived in America between about 1870 and 1924, but the same books could have been written about the other European populations who came across the Atlantic during the same period.

Now, twenty-eight years after the appearance of Alba's volume, their descendants are of the fifth and maybe even sixth generation. They are sometimes called later-generation ethnics (LGEs hereafter) and their ethnicity, which has so far been little studied, deserves further research.

A review of the major and some minor ethnic journals and a 'Quick Search' of the many databases at Columbia University's library using the phrase 'fourth generation ethnicity' found very few citations. Since I wanted to focus solely on ethnicity, I purposely omitted citations about ethno-religious populations, for example Jews and Greeks for whom religious membership helps keep late-generation ethnicity alive.

My search suggested two basic hypotheses: first, late-generation European ethnicity has virtually disappeared or at least is no longer visible; and second, researchers have more or less stopped studying the descendants of the European immigration, and paid only minimal attention to the newest European immigrants who arrived here in the last half century. Perhaps both hypotheses are relevant; but more important for my purpose, they suggest many other interesting and important questions for future study, some of which are described below.

That the old European ethnicity may be becoming invisible is almost true by definition. By now the descendants of that immigration are far enough removed from

their immigrant ancestors in time, place and social space that most probably do not even know their names.

More important, by now three or more generations of interethnic intermarriage have taken place, and today's young LGEs may have grandparents with half a dozen or more ethnic or multi-ethnic origins.¹ As a result, they have so many ethnic options (Waters 1990) that choosing one or two is impossible and choosing none may be the easiest solution.

Whatever is left of their ethnicity, whether as practice or identity, is likely to be dominated by some material or non-material symbols from the past that stand for the real and imagined ethnicity of their ancestors. Indeed, if ethnicity of any kind is of interest to the LGEs, it would either be a family tradition or an ethnic symbol, probably in an Americanized version.

Thus, if symbolic ethnicity survives (Gans 1979), it is likely to be heavily nostalgic. At the same time, however, ethnicity has turned into an increasingly widespread source of diversion for ever more Americans – or at least those people who enjoy exercising a large variety of ethnic restaurant options. Whether and how they feel ethnic might make for an interesting study.

Late-generation ethnicity

In order to look for and at ethnicity among the LGEs, one can distinguish between (1) ethnic structure: the formal and informal organizations and institutions that conduct literal and figurative ethnic business; (2) private ethnic practice: the familial and other primary group rituals, routines and other activities; and (3) ethnic identity: whether, when, where and how people perceive themselves as ethnics and how they feel and express this identity.

Ethnic organizations

Formal ethnic organizations and institutions are the most visible evidence of ethnicity's persistence, and even simple Googling reveals lists of national, regional and local organizations for every European population that arrived in the USA between 1870 and 1924 – and even before then. Informal organizations, from social and card-playing clubs to family circles, if any such still exist among LGEs, are surely more numerous but they will be visible only to empirical researchers, particularly ethnographers, studying the communities where their members live.

Even the formal organizations call for close empirical study, since some lack offices and are merely phone numbers, while others are kept alive by a handful of people. These may be LGEs, so-called ethnic converts (Kelly 1996), including White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASPs) who have married LGEs, and other LGEs who have made professional careers or avocations devoted to keeping ethnic organizations alive. Most likely they will also include recent European newcomers, some of whom may have altered these organizations to fit their own ethnic and acculturative requirements.

My Googling suggests that these organizations fall into four types – promotional, commercial, performing and preserving – although some may combine two or more of these functions. Promotional organizations publicize and keep visible the ethnic population, its ethnicity, and the label by which the population is known. They may

also include social clubs that promote the ethnicity simply by being so labelled. Other promotional organizations may defend that population against stereotyping, stigmatization and discrimination.

Commercial organizations are businesses that sell a variety of ethnic products and symbols such as foods, holiday paraphernalia and arts and crafts, some of them especially to tourists. Ethnic food manufacturers and distributors remain numerous, although some produce foods for several ethnic tastes. Others, particularly large corporate firms, produce and sell ethnic foods such as bagels and pizza that have become part of mainstream non-ethnic fare.

Performing organizations primarily hold festivals, many of them annual, with programmes of folk dances and ethnic music, theatre pieces and the like. Most are labelled traditional, although some offer reconstructed and newly constructed tradition. For example, the stores of Lindsborg, Kansas, which calls itself 'Little Sweden USA', offer visitors an 'Adventure in Swedish Tradition' (Schnell 2003).

Many of the performing organizations seek to attract tourists, whether LGEs and other ethnics, curious about their ethnic pasts or visitors looking for something new and different to entertain the kids. Who offers what versions of an ethnic past or present to what kinds of audiences is a worthwhile topic of study, including for sociologists of tourism (Wood 1998).

Although all of the organizations aim to preserve one or another component of their ethnicity, the preserving organizations are mainly concerned with saving the arts, literature, scholarship and other forms of the ethnic culture – higher rather than popular, and past more than present. Often the culture to be preserved is in a version of its initial immigration form; second-, third- and later-generation American representations of that culture may not offer the desired nostalgic ethnicity.

Preserving organizations take many forms: language classes, ethnic studies enterprises, community centres as well as university teaching and research centres and museums. The educational preservation organizations often seek to encourage future ethnic literacy and sometimes simply to preserve the language among whoever wants to learn it. A number receive support and subsidies from the European countries whose Americanized structures and cultures they are preserving.

Other surviving institutions with ethnic features include industries that have long been dominated by one or maybe two ethnic groups and that have been profitable enough for LGEs to remain in them – even though they do not necessarily produce ethnic goods or services. Some are low-status occupations and industries that immigrants moved into as labourers, perhaps because no one else would do such work, such as garbage removal. LGEs may still dominate them, but now as owners and managers.

Some are prestigious enterprises with creative or well-paid jobs, the most visible being the entertainment industry. This industry remains heavily Eastern European Jewish, although many of its contemporary workers only identify as Jews.

Private ethnic practices

LGE organizations with ethnic identifiers are at least visible on Google, and so are storefronts selling ethnic goods and services. However, private LGE practices, which would normally be found in families, other primary groups and networks, are nearly

invisible. Empirical researchers need to find them and their participants; not an easy task since almost all are scattered in physical and social space, as well as cyberspace.

By practices I mean at home and micro-social activities and actions, many of them occasional, including rituals but also some routines. Practices require tools, and therefore also the toolkits in Swidler's (1986) metaphorical definition of culture – as well as the material and symbolic objects associated with both practices and tools. These become ethnic practices if the people practising them think of them as ethnic, or connect them to the ways of earlier ancestors, or if they can be identified as such by researchers.

Research projects on ethnic practices may end up with many negative findings, for LGEs may retain few, if any, practices that fit my definition of ethnic ones. These are apt to be family habits associated with foods and cooking or other shared activities, the recital of family and children's stories, as well as favourite words and phrases left over from the language that the immigrants brought with them. These words could even be ethnic first or pet names.

Some practices require literal tools of immigrant or derivative immigrant origin, including ethnic objects. Among these are history and cook books, family heirlooms, ancestral photographs, letters and other keepsakes from earlier generations.

Most practices will be occasional activities, some perhaps associated with religious and secular holidays or with familial anniversaries. Moreover, these practices will frequently be Americanized versions of the immigrant original, perhaps derived from those created by the second or third generations.

Since most LGEs are by now multi-ethnic, researchers might find an array of practices that were handed down by ancestors of different ethnic origin. An LGE family of Irish-Italian-German-Polish ancestry might have preserved an interesting mix of such practices and may not even remember their ethnic origin.²

Organizational ethnic practices should also be studied. Most relevant to study would be which of the four types of ethnic organizations use what practices, tools, objects and symbols and from what generations. However, researchers might also discover organizations that do without ethnic practices, seeking only to attract people who identify with, or are curious about, the organization's ethnicity. Social or card-playing clubs are most likely to fall into this category, unless the card (or other) games are of ethnic origin. In any case, there is much to study.

Ethnic identity

Symbolic ethnicity came into being in part to express an ethnic identity and to feel ethnic, but occasions for feeling ethnic, whether voluntary or involuntary, are fewer than before. Involuntary ones are especially rare, because LGEs are not often identified as such and are therefore rarely asked about their ancestry.

Nonetheless, at that time, many of the descendants of European immigrants, including LGEs, still labelled themselves by national origin. For example, while the country's Swedish immigrant population numbered only about 50,000 in 2000, about four million people described their ancestry as Swedish (Blanck 2009).

Identity is easier to turn on and off than the rest of ethnicity and is likely to endure longer after ethnic practices are forgotten. Identity can even be recalled suddenly. An LGE of long-ago Italian American ancestry could feel momentarily

Italian if an athlete with an Italian name breaks a record, and someone of past Polish ancestry might feel that way about a media celebration of *kielbasa*.

An ethnic identity can also be re-established if it useful economically, socially or politically. Such occasions are rarer these days, including in politics, where a big-city 'balanced ticket' no longer consists of European-origin ethnics, but instead consists of a black, a Latino and perhaps an Asian candidate in addition to a white one.

Discrimination continues to evoke identity feelings, but with racial discrimination, particularly towards African Americans, remaining pervasive, ethnic discriminatory incidents are slowly becoming extinct in most places. Some stereotypes remain, such as the *mafioso* one associated with Italian Americans, and Polish jokes may still be told privately, but openly hostile ones have been excised from mainstream popular culture. The now almost instant protest against the public mentions of racial, ethnic and religious slurs and stereotypes has only hastened this and other excisions.

Research about ethnic identity can be combined with study of ethnic practices, as long as researchers make sure that they talk also with people who no longer participate in any practices. Whether and how often people feel ethnic, and what occasions bring it on, is the primary research topic, but since most LGEs will have several identity options, which one or ones are invoked and when also needs to be studied. If ethnicity is an enjoyable leisure-time activity, some LGEs might find ways to exercise all their options.

Even so, researchers must always bear in mind that ethnicity is only one facet of identity, and probably always was, except when it was attached to an important role. Current such roles include doing ethnic work, engaging in ethnic activism, and teaching or researching ethnicity. But for many ethnics it was generally a minor identity facet unless they were being stereotyped or discriminated against.

Disappearing European ethnicity

The preceding mixture of hypothesis, observation and occasional research findings suggests that, to follow Alba's metaphor, darkness is enveloping late-generation European ethnicity. Most LGEs are already or will soon be like all other Americans, the descendants of long-ago – and often forgotten – immigrants. As already noted, their ethnic identity or identities will be remembered and perhaps even felt and expressed when the situation demands it, but even these situations will eventually disappear.

After all, what the European immigrants took with them to America over a century ago, and even what their children and grandchildren maintained, reconstructed or invented, is not relevant for life in the twenty-first century. Only the so-called motherhood values, such as the importance of family, the virtue of hard work, honesty and the like, which every immigrant population thought it had invented and brought to America, remain – and these values are clearly not ethnic.

Ethnic institutions and organizations may survive longer, particularly commercial ones, notably those serving tourist curiosity about their and others' past ethnicities. However, once established, such organizations can be run and staffed by people without a related ethnic bone in their body.³ Preserving organizations should also survive, at least if they can be perpetuated with little money (or by people with lots of money). They could even remain when all others are gone.⁴

In short, sufficient late-generation European ethnicity will exist long enough to deserve continued attention. Despite all the drawbacks of generational analysis, the ethnic paths followed and abandoned by each generation should be investigated, to determine what patterns and lines, now of decline and disappearance rather than acculturation and assimilation, can be found.

Even more important, what is held on to until the very end needs study. Such research should be conducted especially among the very late generations, for example among Scandinavians, Germans and other Northern Europeans still living in or near places in which their immigrant ancestors settled. Nonetheless, researchers should also look for once socially and spatially isolated ethnic enclaves, which, or fragments of which, have remained in acculturated form (e.g. Hannan 2005). These enclaves may provide case studies of the long-term processes that drive the rise and fall of ethnic communities and their populations.

The possibilities of replenishment

Although congressional legislation terminated the turn of last century European immigration in 1924, the new waves of immigrants that arrived after 1965 have included people from the same countries, and in some cases even from the same region. Thus, in 2000, the US census reported that the country's population included nearly half a million foreign-born from both Italy and Poland, over 300,000 from Russia, nearly as many from Ukraine, about 150,000 each from Greece and Romania, and around 100,000 each from Hungary, the Czech Republic and Holland.

Although these recent immigrant newcomers and their children deserve far more research attention than they have so far received, for the purpose of this paper, two research questions have priority. One is whether and how any of these newcomers have replenished the ethnic structures and cultures of the earlier immigration, particularly whether they have revived, strengthened – or taken over and reprogrammed – LGE organizations and institutions. The second question is whether the newcomers have motivated, encouraged or pressured their LGE predecessors to return to at least some of the old ways (Jimenez 2009).

The likelihood that either kind of replenishment has taken place is small; in fact, conflict between old and new is as likely as cooperation (Erdmans 1995). The newcomers often differ from the LGEs in age, class and other ways, so that they have almost nothing in common, other than perhaps nominal national origin.⁵ In addition, the countries left by the newest immigrants are very different from those remembered by the LGEs. As one of Erdmans' (1995, 180) Polish newcomers to Chicago put it: 'Everyone here's having polka parties. In Poland, no one polkas.'

Also, the newcomers do not live in the America of the LGEs, nor in the same neighbourhoods even if they have settled in the same cities. In addition, their organizational activities, private practices and identity expressions will differ from those remaining among the LGEs.

Consequently, it is also doubtful that the new immigrants have persuaded the LGEs to reverse their acculturation and re-embrace old ethnic activities, practices and identities. However, researchers should also find out if the LGEs have persuaded any newcomers to move out of the immigrant enclaves and other structures that they have established, thereby hastening their acculturation and assimilation. Perhaps the

children of these newcomers are already learning about symbolic ways of being ethnic.

The case of Asian and Latino newcomers

Last but not least, researchers can ask, as many are already doing, whether the descendants of the Asian, Latino and other non-European immigrants who have arrived here since 1965 will follow the same acculturative and assimilatory processes and patterns as the Europeans who arrived between 1870 and 1924.

It is worth remembering that acculturation and assimilation are terms invented by immigration researchers and other social scientists to describe universal social processes of adaptation and incorporation. Whether undertaken by immigrants getting settled here or by graduate students transitioning to assistant professorships, both have to acculturate in order to function in their new surroundings.

Assimilation also requires informal or formal entry permits from organizations or other groups being entered, which is harder than acculturating, for example for immigrants seeking entry into a weak labour market, or into social organizations that deem them ineligible. Dark-skinned immigrants are barred from many opportunities for assimilation by racial discrimination.

The post-1965 immigration waves that have now continued for nearly fifty years differ significantly in race, class and geographic origins from the Europeans who are now LGEs. For example, they include all the skin colours into which white America divides phenotypes. A significant proportion are professionals, technicians and skilled blue-collar workers, while many of today's poor immigrants, especially from the western hemisphere, are undocumented and therefore frequently persecuted and prosecuted.

Furthermore, the current waves of newcomers may have grown up with exported American popular culture and other American practices. As a result, they may end up acculturating more quickly and completely than the ancestors of the LGEs.

Consequently, it is likely that the descendants of many if not most Asian and Latino Americans will eventually follow the same paths as the LGEs. Asians are becoming English-only speakers as quickly as third-generation Europeans (Alba et al. 2002) and are taking to American schooling more successfully than many native-born students (Louie 2004; Kasinitz et al. 2008).

Second-generation Asian and Latino Americans are already marrying whites at unprecedented rates, and their children and grandchildren will be 'whitened' or de-racialized in much the same way as the Europeans (Gans 2012).

Thus, decades hence, many descendants of the last half-century's immigration will be behaving, thinking and feeling much like today's LGEs. However, all or at least most other things must remain equal, particularly that they will be needed by and therefore allowed into the mainstream economy and the mainstream middle classes in much the same way as the ancestors of current LGEs.

Conclusion

I need to repeat that in the absence of significant research on the fourth and later generations, one can only hypothesize. Moreover, while it is possible that European ethnicity would eventually disappear, it can also reappear. In a global economy,

patterns of immigration are no longer as predictable as in the past. While another large European immigration to America seems unlikely, a combination of European economic disasters and pressure from politically influential white Americans who want to enlarge the white population could someday bring a new set of Europeans to America. But this time, they would not be brought in steerage.

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Notes

1. Alba (1990) found that almost 85% of the immigrants in the Albany New York region that he surveyed were intermarried.
2. Travellers to Spain or Latin America occasionally encounter Catholics and others who light candles on Friday nights as a family tradition, unaware that they may be carrying on Jewish practices of their Spanish ancestors who were forcibly converted many hundreds of years ago.
3. Informal fieldwork suggests that the cooks in many Manhattan ethnic restaurants, whatever their ethnic menus, are currently Mexican or other Latino immigrants.
4. Endowed tenured professorships in ethnic studies, especially ethnic history, may outlast every other ethnic institution.
5. Remember that the boundaries of many of today's European nations differ from those existing at the turn of the last century, and some had only recently become nations when their emigrants left for the USA.

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