Symbolic ethnicity: The future of ethnic groups and cultures in America

Herbert J. Gans [a] [b]

[a] Columbia University

[b] Center for Policy Research

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Herbert J. Gans
Columbia University and Center for Policy Research

Introduction

One of the more notable recent changes in America has been the renewed interest in ethnicity, which some observers of the American scene have described as an ethnic revival. This paper argues that there has been no revival, and that acculturation and assimilation continue to take place. Among third and fourth generation 'ethnics' (the grand and great-grand children of Europeans who came to America during the 'new immigration'), a new kind of ethnic involvement may be occurring, which emphasizes concern with identity, with the feeling of being Jewish or Italian, etc. Since ethnic identity needs are neither intense nor frequent in this generation, however, ethnics do not need either ethnic cultures or organizations; instead, they resort to the use of ethnic symbols. As a result, ethnicity may be turning into symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort, which could, nevertheless, persist for generations.

Identity cannot exist apart from a group, and symbols are themselves a part of culture, but ethnic identity and symbolic ethnicity require very different ethnic cultures and organizations than existed among earlier generations. Moreover, the symbols third generation ethnics use to express their identity are more visible than the ethnic cultures and organizations of the first and second generation ethnics. What appears to be an ethnic revival may therefore only be a more visible form of long-standing phenomena, or of a new stage of acculturation and assimilation. Symbolic ethnicity may also have wider ramifications, however, for David Riesman has suggested that 'being American has some of the same episodic qualities as being ethnic.'[1]

Acculturation and assimilation[2]

The dominant sociological approach to ethnicity has long taken the form of

what Neil Sandberg aptly calls straight-line theory, in which acculturation and assimilation are viewed as secular trends that culminate in the eventual absorption of the ethnic group into the larger culture and general population.[3] Straight-line theory in turn is based on melting pot theory, for it implies the disappearance of the ethnic groups into a single host society. Even so, it does not accept the values of the melting pot theorists, since its conceptualizers could have, but did not, use terms like cultural and social liberation from immigrant ways of life.

In recent years, straight-line theory has been questioned on many grounds. For one thing, many observers have properly noted that even if America might have been a melting pot early in the 20th century, the massive immigration from Europe and elsewhere has since then influenced the dominant groups, summarily labelled White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), and has also decimated their cultural, if not their political and financial power, so that today America is a mosaic, as Andrew Greeley has put it, of subgroups and subcultures.[4] Still, this criticism does not necessarily deny the validity of straight-line theory, since ethnics can also be absorbed into a pluralistic set of subcultures and subgroups, differentiated by age, income, education, occupation, religion, region, and the like.

A second criticism of straight-line theory has centered on its treatment of all ethnic groups as essentially similar, and its failure, specifically, to distinguish between religious groups like the Jews and nationality groups like the Italians, Poles etc. Jews, for example, are a 'peoplehood' with a religious and cultural tradition of thousands of years, but without an 'old country' to which they owe allegiance or nostalgia, while Italians, Poles and other participants in the 'new immigration' came from parts of Europe which in some cases did not even become nations until after the immigrants had arrived in America.

That there are differences between the Jews and the other 'new' immigrants cannot be questioned, but at the same time, the empirical evidence also suggests that acculturation and assimilation affected them quite similarly. (Indeed, one major difference may have been that Jews were already urbanized and thus entered the American social structure at a somewhat higher level than the other new immigrants, who were mostly landless labourers and poor peasants.) Nonetheless, straight-line theory can be faulted for virtually ignoring that immigrants arrived here with two kinds of ethnic cultures, sacred and secular; that they were Jews from Eastern — and Western — Europe, and Catholics from Italy, Poland and elsewhere. (Sacred cultures are, however, themselves affected by national and regional considerations; for example, Italian Catholicism differed in some respects from German or Polish, as did Eastern European Judaism from Western.)

While acculturation and assimilation have affected both sacred and secular cultures, they have affected the latter more than the former, for acculturation has particularly eroded the secular cultures which Jews and Catholics brought from Europe. Their religions have also changed in America, and religious

observance has decreased, more so among Jews than among Catholics, although Catholic observance has begun to fall off greatly in recent years. Consequently, the similar American experience of Catholic and Jewish ethnics suggests that the comparative analysis of straight-line theory is justified, as long as the analysis compares both sacred and secular cultures.

Two further critiques virtually reject straight-line theory altogether. In an insightful recent paper, William Yancey and his colleagues have argued that contemporary ethnicity bears little relation to the ancestral European heritage, but exists because it is functional for meeting present 'exigencies of survival and the structure of opportunity', particularly for working class Americans.[5] Their argument does not invalidate straight-line theory but corrects it by suggesting that acculturation and assimilation, current ethnic organizations and cultures, as well as new forms of ethnicity, must be understood as responses to current needs rather than only as departures from past traditions.

The other critique takes the reverse position; it points to the persistence of the European heritage, argues that the extent of acculturation and assimilation has been overestimated, and questions the rapid decline and eventual extinction of ethnicity posited by some straight-line theorists. These critics call attention to studies which indicate that ethnic cultures and organizations are still functioning, that exogamous marriage remains a practice of numerical minorities, that ethnic differences in various behavior patterns and attitudes can be identified, that ethnic groups continue to act as political interest groups, and that ethnic pride remains strong.[6]

The social phenomena which these observers identify obviously exist; the question is only how they are to be interpreted. Straight-line theory postulates a process, and cross-sectional studies do not preempt the possibility of a continuing trend. Also, like Yancey, *et al.*, some of the critics are looking primarily at poorer ethnics, who have been less touched by acculturation and assimilation than middle class ethnics, and who have in some cases used ethnicity and ethnic organization as a psychological and political defense against the injustices which they suffer in an unequal society.[7] In fact, much of the contemporary behaviour described as ethnic strikes me as working class behaviour, which differs only slightly among various ethnic groups, and then largely because of variations in the structure of opportunities open to people in America, and in the peasant traditions their ancestors brought over from the old country, which were themselves responses to European opportunity structures. In other words, ethnicity is largely a working-class style.[8]

Much the same observations apply to ethnic political activity. Urban political life, particularly among working class people, has always been structured by and through ethnicity, and while ethnic political activity may have increased in the last decade, it has taken place around working class issues rather than ethnic ones. During the 1960s, urban working class Catholic ethnics began to politicize themselves in response to black militancy, the

expansion of black ghettoes, and governmental integration policies which they perceived as publicly legitimated black invasions of ethnic neighbourhoods, but which threatened them more as working class homeowners who could not afford to move to the suburbs. Similarly, working and lower-middle class Catholic ethnics banded together in the suburbs to fight against higher public school taxes, since they could not afford.to pay them while they were also having to pay for parochial schools. Even so, these political activities have been *pan-ethnic*, rather than ethnic, since they often involved coalitions of ethnic groups which once considered each other enemies but were now united by common economic and other interests: The extent to which these pan-ethnic coalitions reflect class rather than ethnic interests is illustrated by the 1968 election campaign of New York City's Mario Proccaccino against John Lindsay. Although an Italian, he ran as a 'candidate of the little people' against what he called the 'limousine liberals'.

The fact that pan-ethnic coalitions have developed most readily in conflicts over racial issues also suggests that in politics, ethnicity can sometimes serve as a convenient euphemism for anti-black endeavors, or for political activities that have negative consequences for blacks. While attitude polls indicate that ethnics are often more tolerant racially than other Americans, working class urban ethnics are also more likely to be threatened, as homeowners and jobholders, by black demands, and may favor specific anti-black-policies not because they are 'racists', but because their own class interests force them to oppose black demands.

In addition, part of what appears as an increase in ethnic political activity is actually an increase in the visibility of ethnic politics. When the pan-ethnic coalitions began to copy the political methods of the civil rights and anti-war movements, their protests became newsworthy and were disseminated all over the country by the mass media. At about the same time, the economic and geographic mobility of Catholic ethnic groups enabled non-Irish Catholic politicians to win important state and national electoral posts for the first time, and their victories were defined as ethnic triumphs, even though they did not rely on ethnic constituents alone, and were not elected on the basis of ethnic issues.

The final, equally direct, criticism of straight-line theory has questioned the continued relevance of the theory, either because of the phenomenon of third-generation return, or because of the emergence of ethnic revivals. Thus, Marcus Hansen argued that acculturation and assimilation were temporary processes, because the third generation could afford to remember an ancestral culture which the traumatic Americanization forced the immigrant and second generations to forget.[9] Hansen's hypothesis can be questioned on several grounds, however. His data, the founding of Swedish and other historical associations in the Midwest, provided slender evidence of a widespread third generation return, particularly among non-academic ethnics. In addition, his theory is static, for Hansen never indicated what would happen in the fourth generation, or what processes were involved in the return that would enable it to survive into the future.[10]

The notion of an ethnic revival has so far been propounded mostly by journalists and essayists, who have supplied impressionistic accounts or case studies of the emergence of new ethnic organizations and the revitalization of old ones.[11] Since third and fourth generation ethnics who are presumably participating in this revival are scattered all over suburbia, there has so far been little systematic research among this population, so that the validity of the revival notion has not yet been properly tested.

The evidence I have seen does not convince me that a revival is taking place. Instead, recent changes can be explained in two ways, neither of which conflict with straight-line theory: (1) Today's ethnics, have become more visible as a result of upward mobility; and (2) they are adopting the new form of ethnic behavior and affiliation I call symbolic ethnicity.

The visibility of ethnicity

The recent upward social, and centrifugal geographic, mobility of ethnics, particularly Catholics, has finally enabled them to enter the middle and upper middle classes, where they have been noticed by the national mass media, which monitor primarily these strata. In the process they have also become more noticeable to other Americans. The newly visible may not participate more in ethnic groups and cultures than before, but their new visibility makes it appear as if ethnicity had been revived.

I noted earlier the arrival of non-Irish Catholic politicians on the national scene. An equally visible phenomenon has been the entry of Catholic ethnic intellectuals into the academy, and its flourishing print culture. To be sure, the scholars are publishing more energetically than their predecessors, who had to rely on small and poverty-stricken ethnic publishing houses, but they are essentially doing what ethnic scholars have always done, only more visibly. Perhaps their energy has also been spurred in part by the need, as academics, to publish so that they do not perish, as well as by their desire to counteract the anti-ethnic prejudices and the entrenched vestiges of the melting pot ideal which still prevail in the more prestigious universities. In some cases, they are also fighting a political battle, because their writings often defend conservative political positions against what they perceive — I think wrongly — as the powerful liberal or radical academic majority. Paradoxically, a good deal of their writing has been nostalgic, celebrating the immigrant culture and its Gemeinschaft at the same time that young Catholic ethnics are going to college partly in order to escape the restrictive pressures of that Gemeinschaft. (Incidentally, an interesting study could be made of the extent to which writers from different ethnic groups, both of fiction and non-fiction, are pursuing nostalgic, contemporary or future-oriented approaches to ethnicity, comparing different ethnic groups, by time of arrival and position in the society today, on this basis.)

What has happened in the academy has also happened in literature and show business. For example, although popular comedy has long been a predominantly Eastern European Jewish occupation, the first generation of

Jewish comic stars had to suppress their ethnicity and even had to change their names, much as did the first generation of academic stars in the prestigious universities. Unlike Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, George Burns, George Jessel and others, the comics of today do not need to hide their origins, and beginning perhaps with Lenny Bruce and Sam Levinson, comics like Buddy Hackett, Robert Klein, Don Rickles and Joan Rivers have used explicitly Jewish material in entertaining the predominantly non-Jewish mass media audience.

Undoubtedly, some of the academics, writers and entertainers have undergone a kind of third generation return in this process. Some have re-embraced their ethnicity solely to spur their careers, but others have experienced a personal conversion. Even so, an empirical study would probably show that in most cases, their ethnic attitudes have not changed; either they have acted more publicly and thus visibly than they did in the past, or in responding to a hospitable cultural climate, they have openly followed ethnic impulses which they had previously suppressed.

Ethnicity in the third generation

The second explanation for the changes that have been taking place among third generation ethnics will take up most of the rest of this paper; it deals with what is happening among the less visible population, the large mass of predominantly middle class third and fourth generation ethnics, who have not been studied enough either by journalists or social scientists.[12]

In the absence of systematic research, it is even difficult to discern what has actually been happening, but several observers have described the same ethnic behavior in different words. Michael Novak has coined the phrase 'voluntary ethnicity'; Samuel Eisenstadt has talked about 'Jewish diversity'; Allan Silver about 'individualism as a valid mode of Jewishness', and Geoffrey Bock about 'public Jewishness'.[13] What these observers agree on is that today's young ethnics are finding new ways of being ethnics, which I shall later label symbolic ethnicity.

For the third generation, the secular ethnic cultures which the immigrants brought with them are now only an ancestral memory, or an exotic tradition to be savored once in a while in a museum or at an ethnic festival. The same is true of the 'Americanization cultures', the immigrant experience and adjustment in America, which William Kornblum suggests may have been more important in the lives of the first two generations than the ethnic cultures themselves. The old ethnic cultures serve no useful function for third generation ethnics who lack direct and indirect ties to the old country, and neither need nor have much knowledge about it. Similarly, the Americanization cultures have little meaning for people who grew up without the familial conflict over European and American ways that beset their fathers and mothers: the second generation which fought with and was often ashamed of immigrant parents.

Assimilation is still continuing, for it has always progressed more slowly

than acculturation. If one distinguishes between primary and secondary assimilation, that is, out of ethnic primary and secondary groups, the third generation is now beginning to move into non-ethnic primary groups.[14] Although researchers are still debating just how much intermarriage is taking place, it is rising in the third generation for both Catholic ethnic groups and Jews, and friendship choices appear to follow the same pattern.[15]

The departure out of secondary groups has already proceeded much further. Most third generation ethnics have little reason, or occasion, to depend on, or even interact with, other ethnics in important secondary group activities. Ethnic occupational specialization, segregation, and self-segregation are fast disappearing, with some notable exceptions in the large cities. Since the third generation probably works, like other Americans, largely for corporate employers, past occupational ties between ethnics are no longer relevant. Insofar as they live largely in the suburbs, third generation ethnics get together with their fellow homeowners for political and civic activities, and are not likely to encounter ethnic political organizations, balanced tickets, or even politicians who pursue ethnic constituencies.

Except in suburbs where old discrimination and segregation patterns still survive, social life takes place without ethnic clustering, and Catholics are not likely to find ethnic subgroups in the Church. Third generation Jews, on the other hand, particularly those who live in older upper-middle class suburbs where segregation continues, if politely, still probably continue to restrict much of their social life to other Jews, although they have long ago forgotten the secular divisions between German (and other Western) and Eastern European Jews, and among the latter, the division between 'Litwaks' and 'Galizianer'. The religious distinction between German Reform Judaism, and Eastern European Conservatism has also virtually disappeared, for the second generation that moved to the suburbs after World War II already chose its denomination on status grounds rather than national origin.[16] In fact, the Kennedy-Herberg prediction that eventually American religious life would take the form of a triple melting-pot has not come to pass, if only because people, especially in the suburbs, use denominations within the major religions for status differentiation.

Nevertheless, while ethnic ties continue to wane for the third generation, people of this generation continue to *perceive* themselves as ethnics, whether they define ethnicity in sacred or secular terms. Jews continue to remain Jews because the sacred and secular elements of their culture are strongly intertwined, but the Catholic ethnics also retain their secular or national identity, even though it is separate from their religion.[17]

My hypothesis is that in this generation, people are less and less interested in their ethnic cultures and organizations — both sacred and secular — and are instead more concerned with maintaining their ethnic identity, with the feeling of being Jewish, or Italian, or Polish, and with finding ways of feeling and expressing that identity in suitable ways. By identity, I mean here simply the sociopsychological elements that accompany role behavior, and the ethnic role is today less of an ascriptive than a voluntary role that people

assume alongside other roles. To be sure, ethnics are still identified as such by others, particularly on the basis of name, but the behavioral expectations that once went with identification by others have declined sharply, so that ethnics have some choice about when and how to play ethnic roles. Moreover, as ethnic cultures and organizations decline further, fewer ethnic roles are pre-scribed, thus increasing the degree to which people have freedom of role definition.

Ethnic identity can be expressed either in action or feeling, or combina-tions of these, and the kinds of situations in which it is expressed are nearly limitless. Third generation ethnics can join an ethnic organization, or take part in formal or informal organizations composed largely of fellow-ethnics; but they can also find their identity by 'affiliating' with an abstract collectivity which does not exist as an interacting group. That collectivity, moreover, can be mythic or real, contemporary or historical. On the one hand, Jews can express their identity as synagogue members, or as participants in a consciousness-raising group consisting mostly of Jewish women. On the other hand, they can also identify with the Jewish people as a long-suffering collectivity which has been credited with inventing monotheism. If they are non-religious, they can identify with Jewish liberal or socialist political cultures, or with a population which has produced many prominent in-tellectuals and artists in the last 100 years. Similar choices are open to Catho-lic ethnics. In the third generation, Italians can identify through membership in Italian groups, or by strong feelings for various themes in Italian, or Neapolitan or Sicilian culture, and much the same possibilities exist for Catholics whose ancestors came over from other countries.

Needless to say, ethnic identity is not a new, or third generation phenomenon, for ethnics have always had an ethnic identity, but in the past it was largely taken for granted, since it was anchored to groups and roles, and was rarely a matter of choice. When people lived in an ethnic neighbor-hood, worked with fellow ethnics, and voted for ethnic politicians, there was little need to be concerned with identity except during conflict with other ethnic groups. Also, the everyday roles people played were often defined for them by others as ethnic. Being a drygoods merchant was often a Jewish role; restaurant owners were assumed to be Greek; and bartenders, Irish.

The third generation has grown up without assigned roles or groups that anchor ethnicity, so that identity can no longer be taken for granted. People can of course give up their identity, but if they continue to feel it, they must make it more explicit than it was in the past, and must even look for ways of expressing it. This has two important consequences for ethnic behavior. First, given the degree to which the third generation has acculturated and assimilated, most people look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other ways of life. As a result, they refrain from ethnic behavior that requires an arduous or time-consuming commitment, either to a culture that must be practiced constantly, or to organizations that demand active membership. Second, because people's concern is with identity, rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are

free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suit them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse or individualistic ethnicity. Any mode of expressing ethnic identity is valid as long as it enchances the feeling of being ethnic, and any cultural pattern or organization which nourishes that feeling is therefore relevant, providing only that enough people make the same choice when identity expression is a group enterprise.

In other words, as the functions of ethnic cultures and groups diminish and identity becomes the primary way of being ethnic, ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people's lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity and losing its relevance, say, to earning a living or regulating family life. Expressive behavior can take many forms, but is often involves the use of symbols — and symbols as signs rather than as myths.[18] Ethnic symbols are frequently individual cultural practices which are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are 'abstracted' from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it. And if a label is useful to describe the third generation's pursuit of identity, I would propose the term symbolic ethnicity.

Symbolic ethnicity

Symbolic ethnicity can be expressed in a myriad of ways, but above all, I suspect, it is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior. The feelings can be directed at a generalized tradition, or at specific ones: a desire for the cohesive extended immigrant family, or for the obedience of children to parental authority, or the unambiguous orthodoxy of immigrant religion, or the old-fashioned despotic benevolence of the machine politician. People may even sincerely desire to 'return' to these imagined pasts, which are conveniently cleansed of the complexities that accompanied them in the real past, but while they may soon realize that they cannot go back, they may not surrender the wish. Or else they displace that wish on churches, schools, and the mass media, asking them to recreate a tradition, or rather, to create a symbolic tradition, even while their familial, occupational, religious and political lives are pragmatic responses to the imperatives of their roles and positions in local and national hierarchical social structures.

All of the cultural patterns which are transformed into symbols are themselves guided by a common pragmatic imperative: they must be visible and clear in meaning to large numbers of third generation ethnics, and they must be easily expressed and felt, without requiring undue interference in other aspects of life. For example, Jews have abstracted rites de passage and individual holidays out of the traditional religion and given them greater importance, such as the bar mitzvah and bas mitzvah (the parallel ceremony for 13 year old girls that was actually invented in America). Similarly, Chanukah, a minor holiday in the religious calendar has become a major one

in popular practice, partly since it lends itself to impressing Jewish identity on the children. Rites de passage and holidays are ceremonial; and thus symbolic to begin with; equally important, they do not take much time, do not upset the everyday routine, and also become an occasion for family reunions to reassemble family members who are rarely seen on a regular basis. Catholic ethnics pay special attention to saint's days celebrating saints affiliated with their ethnic group, or attend ethnic festivals which take place in the area of first settlement, or in ethnic churches.

Consumer goods, notably food, are another ready source for ethnic symbols, and in the last decades, the food industry has developed a large variety of easily cooked ethnic foods, as well as other edibles which need no cooking, for example, chocolate matzōhs which are sold as gifts at Passover. The response to symbolic ethnicity may even be spreading into the mass media, for films and television programs with ethnic characters are on the increase. The characters are not very ethnic in their behavior, and may only have ethnic names — for example, Lt. Colombo, Fonzi, or Rhoda Goldstein — but in that respect, they are not very different from the ethnic audiences who watch them.

Symbolic ethnicity also takes political forms, through identification or involvement with national politicians and international issues which are sufficiently remote to become symbols. As politicians from non-Irish ethnic backgrounds achieve high state or national office, they become identity symbols for members of their group, supplying feelings of pride over their success. That such politicians do not represent ethnic constituencies, and thus do not become involved in ethnic political disputes only enhances their symbolic function; unlike local ethnic politicians, who are still elected for instrumental bread-and-butter reasons, and thus become embroiled in conflicts that detract from their being symbols of ethnic pride.

Symbolic ethnicity can be practiced as well through politically and geographically even more distant phenomena, such as nationalist movements in the old country. Jews are not interested in their old countries, except to struggle against the maltreatment of Jews in Eastern Europe, but they have sent large amounts of money to Israel, and political pressure to Washington, since the establishment of the State. While their major concern has undoubtedly been to stave off Israel's destruction, they might also have felt that their own identity would be affected by such a disaster. Even if the survival of Israel is guaranteed in the future, however, it is possible that as allegiances toward organized local Jewish communities in America weaken, Israel becomes a substitute community to satisfy identity needs. Similar mechanisms may be at work among other ethnic groups who have recently taken an interest in their ancestral countries, for example the Welsh and Armenians, and among those groups whose old countries are involved in internal conflict, for example the Irish, and Greeks and Turks during the Cyprus war of 1973.

Old countries are particularly useful as identity symbols because they are far away and cannot make arduous demands on American ethnics; even

sending large amounts of money is ultimately an easy way to help unless the donors are making major economic sacrifices. Moreover, American ethnics can identify with their perception of the old country or homeland, transforming it into a symbol which leaves out its domestic or foreign problems that could become sources of conflict for Americans. For example, most American Jews who support Israel pay little attention to its purely domestic policies; they are concerned with its preservation as a state and a Jewish homeland, and see the country mainly as a Zionist symbol.

The symbolic functions of old countries are facilitated further when interest in them is historical; when ethnics develop an interest in their old countries as they were during or before the time of the ancestral departure. Marcus Hansen's notion of third-generation return was actually based on the emergence of interest in Swedish history, which suggests that the third generation return may itself only be another variety of symbolic ethnicity. Third generations can obviously attend to the past with less emotional risk than first and second generation people–who are still trying to escape it, but even so, an interest in ethnic history is a return only chronologically.

Conversely, a new symbol may be appearing among Jews: the Holocaust, which has become a historic example of ethnic group destruction that can now serve as a warning sign for possible future threats. The interest of American Jews in the Holocaust has increased considerably since the end of World War II; when I studied the Jews of Park Forest in 1949–1950, it was almost never mentioned, and its memory played no part whatsoever in the creation of a Jewish community there. The lack of attention to the Holocaust at that time may, as Nathan Glazer suggests, reflect the fact that American Jews were busy with creating new Jewish communities in the suburbs.[19] It is also possible that people ignored the Holocaust then because the literature detailing its horrors had not yet been written, although since many second generation American Jews had relatives who died in the Nazi camps, it seems more likely that people repressed thinking about it until it had become a more historical and therefore a less immediately traumatic event. As a result, the Holocaust may now be serving as a new symbol for the threat of group destruction, which is required, on the one hand, by the fact that rising inter-marriage rates and the continued decline of interest and participation in Jewish religion are producing real fears about the disappearance of American Jewry altogether; and on the other hand, by the concurrent fact that American anti-semitism is no longer the serious threat to group destruction that it was for first and second generation Jews. Somewhat the same process appears to be taking place among some young Armenians who are now reviving the history of the Turkish massacre of Armenians some sixty years later, at a time when acculturation and assimilation are beginning to make inroads into the Armenian community in America.

I suggested previously that ethnicity *per se* had become more visible, but many of the symbols used by the third generation are also visible to the rest of America, not only because the middle class people who use them are more visible than their poorer ancestors, but because the national media are more

adept at communicating symbols than the ethnic cultures and organizations of earlier generations. The visibility of symbolic ethnicity provides further support for the existence of an ethnic revival, but what appears to be a revival is probably *the emergence of a new form of acculturation and assimila-tion* that is taking place under the gaze of the rest of society.

Incidentally, even though the mass media play a major role in enhancing the visibility of ethnicity, and in communicating ethnic symbols, they do not play this role because they are themselves ethnic institutions. True, the mass media, like other entertainment industries, continue to be dominated by Jews (although less so than in the past), but for reasons connected with anti-semitism, or the fear of it, they have generally leaned over backwards to keep Jewish characters and Jewish fare out of their offerings, at least until recently. Even now, a quantitative analysis of major ethnic characters in comedy, drama and other entertainment genres would surely show that Catholic ethnics outnumber Jewish ones. Perhaps the Jews who write or produce so much of the media fare are especially sensitive to ethnic themes and symbols; my own hypothesis, however, is that they are, in this case as in others, simply responding to new cultural tendencies, if only because they must continually innovate. In fact, the arrival of ethnic characters followed the emergence and heightened visibility of ethnic politics in the late 1960s, and the men and women who write the entertainment fare probably took inspiration from news stories they saw on television or read in the papers.

I noted earlier that identity cannot exist apart from a group and that symbols are themselves part of a culture, and in that sense, symbolic ethnicity can be viewed as an indicator of the persistence of ethnic groups and cultures. Symbolic ethnicity, however, does not require functioning groups or net-works; feelings of identity can be developed by allegiances to symbolic groups that never meet, or to collectivities that meet only occasionally, and exist as groups only for the handful of officers that keep them going. By the same token, symbolic ethnicity does not need a practiced culture, even if the symbols are borrowed from it. To be sure, symbolic culture is as much culture as practiced culture, but the latter persists only to supply symbols to the former. Indeed, practiced culture may need to persist, for some, because people do not borrow their symbols from extinct cultures that survive only in museums. And insofar as the borrowed materials come from the practiced culture of the immigrant generation, they make it appear as if an ethnic revival were taking place.

Then, too, it should be noted that even symbolic ethnicity may be relevant for only some of the descendents of the immigrants. As intermarriage continues, the number of people with parents from the same secular ethnic group will continue to decline, and by the time the fourth generation of the old immigration reaches adulthood, such people may be a minority. Most Catholic ethnics will be hybrid, and will have difficulty developing an ethnic identity. For example, how would the son of an Italian mother and Irish father who has married a woman of Polish-German ancestry determine his

ethnicity, and what would he and his wife tell their children? Even if they were willing, would they be able to do so; and in that case to decide their children's ethnicity, how would they rank or synthesize their diverse backgrounds? These questions are empirical, and urgently need to be studied, but I would suggest that there are only three possibilities. Either the parents choose the single ethnic identity they find most satisfying, or they become what I earlier called pan-ethnics, or they cope with diversity by ignoring it, and raise their children as non-ethnic.

The emergence of symbolic ethnicity

The preceding observations have suggested that symbolic ethnicity is a new phenomenon that comes into being in the third generation, but it is probably of earlier vintage and may have already begun to emerge among the immigrants themselves. After all, many of the participants in the new immigration were oppressed economically, politically and culturally in their old countries, and could not have had much affection even for the village and regions they were leaving. Consequently, it is entirely possibly that they began to jettison the old culture and to stay away from ethnic organizations other than churches and unions the moment they came to America, saving only their primary groups, their ties to relatives still left in Europe, and their identity. In small town America, where immigrants were a numerically unimportant minority, the pressure for immediate acculturation and assimilation was much greater than in the cities, but even in the latter, the seeds for symbolic ethnicity may have been sown earlier than previously thought.

Conversely, despite all the pressures toward Americanization and the prejudice and discrimination experienced by the immigrants, they were never faced with conditions that required or encouraged them to give up their ethnicity entirely. Of course, some of the earliest Jewish arrivals to America had become Quakers and Episcopalians before the end of the nineteenth century, but the economic conditions that persuaded the Jamaican Chinese in Kingston to become Creole, and the social isolation that forced Italians in Sydney, Australia, to abolish the traditional familial male–female role segregation shortly after arriving, have never been part of the American experience.[20]

Some conditions for the emergence of symbolic ethnicity were present from the beginning, for American ethnics have always been characterized by freedom of ethnic expression, which stimulated both ethnic diversity, and the right to find one's own way of being ethnic that are crucial to symbolic ethnicity. Although sacred and secular ethnic organizations which insisted that only one mode of being ethnic was legitimate have always existed in America, they have not been able to enforce their norms, in part because they have always had to compete with other ethnic organizations. Even in ethnic neighborhoods where conformity was expected and social control was pervasive, people had some freedom of choice about ethnic cultural practices. For example, the second generation Boston Italians I studied had to conform

to many family and peer group norms, but they were free to ignore ethnic secondary groups, and to drop or alter Italian cultural practices according to their own preference.

Ethnic diversity within the group was probably encouraged by the absence of a state religion, and national and local heads of ethnic communities. For example, American Jewry never had a chief rabbi, or even chief Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis, and the European practice of local Jewish communities electing or appointing local laymen as presidents was not carried across the ocean.[21] Catholic ethnics had to obey the cardinal or bishop heading their diocese, of course, but in those communities where the diocese insisted on an Irish church, the other ethnic groups, notably the Italians, kept their distance from the church, and only in parochial schools was there any attempt to root out secular ethnic patterns. The absence of strong unifying institutions thus created the opportunity for diversity and freedom from the beginning, and undoubtedly facilitated the departure from ethnic cultures and organizations.

Among the Jews, symbolic ethnicity may have been fostered early by self-selection among Jewish emigrants. As Liebman points out, the massive Eastern European immigration to America did not include the rabbis and scholars who practiced what he called an elite religion in the old countries; as a result, the immigrants established what he calls a folk religion in America instead, with indigenous rabbis who were elected or appointed by individual congregations, and were more permissive in allowing, or too weak to prevent, deviations from religious orthodoxy, even of the milder folk variety.[22] Indeed, the development of a folk religion may have encouraged religious and secular diversity among Jews from the very beginning.

Still, perhaps the most important factor in the development of symbolic ethnicity was probably the awareness, which I think many second generation people had already reached, that neither the practice of ethnic culture nor participation in ethnic organizations were essential to being and feeling ethnic. For Jews, living in a Jewish neighborhood or working with Jews every day was enough to maintain Jewish identity. When younger second generation Jews moved to suburbia in large numbers after World War II, many wound up in communities in which they were a small numerical minority, but they quickly established an informal Jewish community of neighborly relations, and then built synagogues and community centers to formalize and supplement the informal community. At the time, many observers interpreted the feverish building as a religious revival, but for most Jews, the synagogue was a symbol that could serve as a means of expressing identity without requiring more than occasional participation in its activities.[23] Thus, my observations among the second generation Jews of Park Forest and other suburbs led me to think as far back as the mid 1950s that among Jews, at least, the shift to symbolic ethnicity was already under way.[24]

The future of ethnicity

The emergence of symbolic ethnicity naturally raises the question of its

persistence into the fifth and sixth generations. Although the Catholic and Jewish religions are certain to endure, it appears that as religion becomes less important to people, they, too will be eroded by acculturation and assimilation. Even now, synagogues see most of their worshippers no more than once or twice a year, and presumably, the same trend will appear, perhaps more slowly, among Catholics and Protestants as well.

Whether the secular aspects of ethnicity can survive beyond the fourth generation is somewhat less certain. One possibility is that symbolic ethnicity will itself decline as acculturation and assimilation continue, and then disappear as erstwhile ethnics forget their secular ethnic identity to blend into one or another subcultural melting pot. The other possibility is that symbolic ethnicity is a steady-state phenomenon that can persist into the fifth and sixth generations.

Obviously, this question can only be guessed at, but my hypothesis is that symbolic ethnicity may persist. The continued existence of Germans, Scandinavians, and Irish after five or more generations in America suggests that in the larger cities and suburbs, at least, they have remained ethnic because they have long practiced symbolic ethnicity.[25] Consequently, there is good reason to believe that the same process will also take place among ethnics of the new immigration.

Ethnic behavior, attitudes, and even identity are, however, determined not only by what goes on among the ethnics, but also by developments in the larger society, and especially by how that society will treat ethnics in the future; what costs it will levy and what benefits it will award to them as ethnics. At present, the costs of being and feeling ethnic are slight. The changes which the immigrants and their descendants wrought in America now make it unnecessary for ethnics to surrender their ethnicity to gain upward mobility, and today ethnics are admitted virtually everywhere, provided they meet economic and status requirements, except at the very highest levels of the economic, political, and cultural hierarchies. Moreover, since World War II, the ethnics have been able to shoulder blacks and other racial minorities with the deviant and scapegoat functions they performed in an earlier America, so that ethnic prejudice and 'institutional ethnism' are no longer significant, except again at the very top of the societal hierarchies.

To be sure, some ethnic scapegoating persists at other levels of these hierarchies; American Catholics are still blamed for the policies of the Vatican, Italo-Americans are criticized for the Mafia, and urban ethnics generally have been portrayed as racists by a sometime coalition of white and black Protestant, Jewish, and other upper-middle class cosmopolitans. But none of these phenomena, however repugnant, strike me as serious enough to persuade many to hide their ethnicity. More important but less often noticed, white working class men, and perhaps others, still use ethnic stereotypes to trade insults, but this practice serves functions other than the maintenance of prejudice or inequality.

At the same time, the larger society also seems to offer some benefits for being ethnic. Americans increasingly perceive themselves as undergoing cultural homogenization, and whether or not this perception is justified,

they are constantly looking for new ways to establish their differences from each other. Meanwhile, the social, cultural and political turbulence of the last decade, and the concurrent delegitimation of many American institutions have also cast doubt on some of the other ways by which people identify themselves and differentiate themselves from each other. Ethnicity, now that it is respectable and no longer a major cause of conflict, seems therefore to be ideally suited to serve as a distinguishing characteristic. Moreover, in a mobile society, people who move around and therefore often find themselves living in communities of strangers, tend to look for commonalities that make strangers into neighbors, and shared ethnicity may provide mobile people with at least an initial excuse to get together. Finally, as long as the European immigration into America continues, people will still be perceived, classified, and ranked at least in part by ethnic origin. Consequently, external forces exist to complement internal identity needs, and unless there is a drastic change in the allocation of costs and benefits with respect to ethnicity, it seems likely that the larger society will also encourage the persistence of symbolic ethnicity.

Needless to say, it is always possible that future economic and political conditions in American society will create a demand for new scapegoats, and if ethnics are forced into this role, so that ethnicity once more levies social costs, present tendencies will be interrupted. Under such conditions, some ethnics will try to assimilate faster and pass out of all ethnic roles, while others will revitalize the ethnic group socially and culturally if only for self-protection. Still, the chance that Catholic ethnics will be scapegoated more than today seems very slight. A serious economic crisis could, however, result in a resurgence of anti-semitism, in part because of the affluence of many American Jews, in part because of their visibly influential role in some occupations, notably mass communications.

If present societal trends continue, however, symbolic ethnicity should become the dominant way of being ethnic by the time the fourth generation of the new immigration matures into adulthood, and this in turn will have consequences for the structure of American ethnic groups. For one thing, as secondary and primary assimilation continue, and ethnic networks weaken and unravel, it may be more accurate to speak of ethnic aggregates rather than groups. More important, since symbolic ethnicity does not depend on ethnic cultures and organizations, their future decline and disappearance must be expected, particularly those cultural patterns which interfere with other aspects of life, and those organizations which require active membership.

Few such patterns and organizations are left in any case, and leaders of the remaining organizations have long been complaining bitterly over what they perceive as the cultural and organizational apathy of ethnics. They also criticize the resort to symbolic ethnicity, identifying it as an effortless way of being ethnic which further threatens their own persistence. Even so, attacking people as apathetic or lazy, or calling on them to revive the practices and loyalties of the past have never been effective for engendering support, and reflect instead the desperation of organizations which cannot offer new

incentives that would enable them to recruit members.

Some cultural patterns and organizations will survive. Patterns which lend themselves to transformation into symbols and easy practice, such as annual holidays, should persist. So will organizations which create and distribute symbols, or 'ethnic goods' such as foodstuffs or written materials, but need few or no members and can function with small staffs and low over-heads. In all likelihood, most ethnic organizations will eventually realize that in order to survive, they must deal mainly in symbols, using them to generate enough support to fund other activities as well.

The demand for current ethnic symbols may require the maintenance of at least some old cultural practices, possibly in museums, and through the work of ethnic scholars who keep old practices alive by studying them. It is even possible that the organizations which attempt to maintain the old cultures will support themselves in part by supplying ethnic nostalgia, and some ethnics may aid such organizations if only to assuage their guilt at having given up ancestral practices.

Still, the history of religion and nationalism, as well as events of recent years, should remind us that the social process sometimes moves in dialectical ways, and that acculturative and assimilative actions by a majority occasion-ally generate revivalistic reactions by a minority. As a result, even ethnic aggregates in which the vast majority maintains its identity in symbolic ways will probably always bring forth small pockets of neo-traditionalism – of rebel converts to sacred and secular ways of the past. They may not influence the behavior of the majority, but they are almost always highly visible, and will thus continue to play a role in the ethnicity of the future.

Symbolic ethnicity and straight-line theory

The third and fourth generation's concern with ethnic identity and its expression through symbols seem to me to fit straight-line theory, for symbolic ethnicity cannot be considered as evidence either of a third generation return or a revival. Instead, it constitutes only another point in the secular trend that is drawn, implicitly, in straight-line theory, although it could also be a point at which the declining secular trend begins to level off and perhaps straightens out.

In reality, of course, the straight-line has never been quite straight, for even if it accurately graphs the dominant ethnic experience, it ignores the ethnic groups who still continue to make tiny small bumps and waves in the line. Among these are various urban and rural ethnic enclaves, notably among the poor; the new European immigrants who help to keep these enclaves from disappearing; the groups which successfully insulate themselves from the rest of American society in deliberately-enclosed enclaves; and the rebel converts to sacred and secular ways of the past who will presumably continue to appear.

Finally, even if I am right to predict that symbolic ethnicity can persist into the fifth and sixth generations, I would be foolish to suggest that it is a

permanent phenomenon. Although all Americans, save the Indians, came here as immigrants and are thus in one sense ethnics, people who arrived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and before the mid-nineteenth century 'old' immigration, are, except in some rural enclaves, no longer ethnics even if they know where their emigrant ancestors came from.

The history of groups whose ancestors arrived here seven or more generations ago suggests that eventually, the ethnics of the new immigration will be like them; they may retain American forms of the religions which their ancestors brought to America, but their secular cultures will be only a dim memory, and their identity will bear only the minutest trace, if that, of their national origin. Ultimately, then, the secular trend of straight-line theory will hit very close to zero, and the basic postulates of the theory will turn out to have been accurate — unless of course by then America, and the ways it makes Americans, has altered drastically in some now unpredictable manner.

Notes

*A longer version of this paper appears in Herbert J. Gans, Nathan Glazer, Joseph R. Gusfield and Christopher Jencks, eds, *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979. The paper was originally stimulated by S. N. Eisenstadt's talk at Columbia University in November 1975 on 'Unity and Diversity in Contemporary Jewish Society'. For helpful comments on an earlier draft, I am grateful to Harold Abramson, Richard Alba, James Crispino, Nathan Glazer, Milton Gordon, Andrew Greeley, William Kornblum, Peter Marris, Michael Novak, David Riesman, Paul Ritterband, Allan Silver and John Slawson.

1.   Personal communication. Incidentally, David Riesman is now credited with having invented the term ethnicity as it is currently used. (Hereafter, I shall omit personal communication footnotes, but most of the individuals named in the text supplied ideas or data through personal communication.)
2.   For reasons of brevity, I employ these terms rather than Gordon's more detailed concepts. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life,* New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, Chapter 3.
3.   Neil C. Sandberg, *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation: The Polish-American Community,* New York, Praeger, 1974. The primary empirical application of straight-line theory is probably still W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1945.
4.   See e.g., Andrew Greeley, *Ethnicity in the United States,* New York, Wiley, 1974, Chapter 1.
5.   W. Yancey, E. Ericksen and R. Juliani, 'Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation', *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 41, June 1976, pp. 391–403, quote at p. 400.
6.   The major works include Greeley, op. cit.; Harold J. Abramson, *Ethnic Diversity in Catholic America,* New York, Wiley, 1973; and Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot,* Cambridge, MIT Press, 2nd ed. 1970.
7.   Class differences in the degree of acculturation and assimilation were first noted

by Warner and Srole, op. cit.; for some recent data among Poles, see Sandberg, op. cit.
8.   Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, New York, Free Press, 1962, Chap. 11. See also Dennis Wrong, 'How Important is Social Class', in Irving Howe, ed. *The World of the Blue Collar Worker*, New York, Quadrangle, 1972, pp. 297–309; William Kornblum, *Blue Collar Community*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974; and Stephen Steinberg,*The Academic Melting Pot*, New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1977.
9.   Marcus L. Hansen, *The Problems of the Third Generation Immigrant*, Rock Island, Ill., Augustana Historical Society, 1938; and 'The Third Generation in America', *Commentary*, Vol. 14, November 1952, pp. 492–500.
10.   See also Harold J. Abramson, 'The Religioethnic Factor and the American Experience: Another Look at the Three-Generations Hypothesis', *Ethnicity*, Vol. 2, June 1975, pp. 163–177.
11.   One of the most influential works has been Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, New York, Macmillan, 1971.
12.   Perhaps the first, and now not sufficiently remembered, study of third-generation Jews was Judith Kramer and Seymour Leventman, *The Children of the Gilded Ghetto*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961.
13.   Geoffrey Bock, 'The Jewish Schooling of American Jews', unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, 1976.
14.   The notion of primary assimilation extends Gordon's concept of marital assimilation to include movement out of the extended family, friendship circles and other peer groups. In describing marital assimilation, Gordon did, however, mention the primary group as well. Gordon, op. cit. p. 80.
15.   The major debate at present is between Abramson and Alba, the former viewing the amont of intermarriage among Catholic ethnics as low, and the latter as high. See Abramson, 'Ethnic Diversity in Catholic America', op. cit.; and Richard Alba, 'Social Assimilation of American Catholic National-Origin Groups', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 41, December 1976, pp. 1030–1046.
16.   See e.g., Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, New York, Basic Books, 1967; Herbert J. Gans, 'The Origin and Growth of a Jewish Community in the Suburbs: A Study of the Jews of Park Forest', in Marshall Sklare, ed., *The Jews: Social Pattern of an American Group*, New York, Free Press, 1958, pp. 205–248, and Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners*, New York, Pantheon, 1967, pp. 73–80. These findings may not apply to communities with significant numbers of German Jews with Reform leanings. There are few Orthodox Jews in the suburbs, except in those surrounding New York.
17.   Sandberg, op. cit. and James Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic Groups: The Italian Case*, New York, Center for Migration Studies, 1979.
18.   My use of the word symbol here follows Lloyd Warner's concept of symbolic behavior. See W. Lloyd Warner, *American Life: Dream and Reality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, Chapter 1.
19.   See Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1972, pp. 114–115.
20.   On the Jamaica Chinese, see Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism*, New York, Stein and Day, 1977, Chapter 5; on the Sydney Italians, see Rina Huber, *From Pasta to Pavlova*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1977, Part 3.
21.   For a study of one unsuccessful attempt to establish a community presidency, see Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1970.
22.   Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973. Chapter 3. Liebman notes that the few elite rabbis who did come to America quickly sensed they were in alien territory and returned to Eastern Europe. The survivors of the Holocaust who came to America after World War II were too few and too late to do more than influence the remaining Jewish orthodox organizations.

23.   Gans, The Origin of a Jewish Community in the Suburbs, op. cit.

24.   See Herbert J. Gans, 'American Jewry: Present and Future', *Commentary*, Vol. 21, May 1956, pp. 422—430, which includes a discussion of 'symbolic Judaism'.

25.   Unfortunately, too little attention has been devoted by sociologists to ethnicity among descendants of the old immigration.