

Ethnic Options

Choosing Identities
in America

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The Costs of a Costless Community

What does claiming an ethnic label mean for a white middle-class American? Census data and my interviews suggest that ethnicity is increasingly a personal choice of whether to be ethnic at all, and, for an increasing majority of people, of which ethnicity to be. An ethnic identity is something that does not affect much in everyday life. It does not, for the most part, limit choice of marriage partner (except in almost all cases to exclude non-whites). It does not determine where you will live, who your friends will be, what job you will have, or whether you will be subject to discrimination. It matters only in voluntary ways—in celebrating holidays with a special twist, cooking a special ethnic meal (or at least calling a meal by a special ethnic name), remembering a special phrase or two in a foreign language. However, in spite of all the ways in which it does not matter, people cling tenaciously to their ethnic identities: they value having an ethnicity and make sure their children know “where they come from.”

In this chapter I suggest two reasons for the curious paradox posed by symbolic ethnicity. First, I believe it stems from two contradictory desires in the American character: a quest for community on the one hand and a desire for individuality on the other. Second, symbolic ethnicity persists because of its ideological “fit” with racist beliefs.

AMERICAN VALUES AND SYMBOLIC ETHNICITY

Analysts of American culture have long noticed the fundamental tension between the high values Americans place on both individuality and conformity. Writing over a hundred years ago on the American psyche and character, Alexis de Tocqueville developed a theme that has been a recurrent observation of all students of the nature of American character—the tension between the conflicting values of individualism and conformity, or between self-reliance and cooperation. In fact, Tocqueville coined the term *individualism* to describe the particular way in which people in America “turned in on themselves” all of their feelings and beliefs:

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his task, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. (Tocqueville [1835–39] 1969, 506)

Tocqueville noticed that while individualism led people to find their own beliefs within themselves, this isolation was at the same time compatible with conformity, because people are constantly looking for affirmation of those beliefs in the people around them. Contrasting democratic societies with aristocratic ones, Tocqueville argues that while “knowing your place” in an aristocratic society binds individuals to their ancestors and descendants, the peculiar effect of democracy is to isolate individuals from one another and from the generations that precede and follow them:

As social equality spreads there are more and more people who, though neither rich or powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.

Thus not only does democracy make men forget their ancestors, but also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart. (Tocqueville [1835–39] 1969, 508)

Tocqueville saw the uniquely American proclivity for joining voluntary groups—associations of all different kinds—as a necessary moderating influence on this individualism. By participation in these

small groups—local government and communities—Americans would find the sense of connection to others that would inoculate them from the dangers of despotism. Without these communities, the danger of a mass society of isolated individuals is that they are easy prey to despots taking advantage of a democratic system.

Since Tocqueville first noticed this tension between individualism and conformity, it has been a central theme in discussions of the nature of American culture and character. Rupert Wilkinson, in *The Pursuit of American Character* (1988), a review of writing on American character between 1940 and 1980, argues that the dual attraction of Americans to individualism and community is the overriding theme of all accounts of American character in this period. He argues that the course from the 1940s to the 1980s was full circle, starting with a renewed interest in Tocqueville’s concern with individualism, proceeding through a period of concern with social pressure and conformity in books like David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, and then returning to a concern with unstable, isolating egoism in Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* and Robert Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart*.

Describing the situation in the 1980s and the most recent books examining the elusive “American character,” Wilkinson focuses on the concern of these authors with the conflict “between modern American culture and deep yearnings for community,” and a renewed stress on the problems caused for people by social atomism, rather than conformity.¹

Wilkinson asks the interesting question of whether this shift reflects merely a change in writers’ sensibilities or an actual change in American behavior and values. He suggests that the massive suburbanization that has occurred since the 1940s may have led to this move on the part of most Americans away from extensive involvement in community:

Suburbia itself may have become less communal...[one] sees a mass of over-equipped houses and yards which have become small, private islands. Front porch society, where everyone met everyone, has been closed down by domestic technology: the automobile, electronic entertainment, and air conditioning. Families either vanish indoors (or into their backyards) or whisk themselves away on wheels. (Wilkinson 1988, 43)

1. Wilkinson cites recent works such as Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart*, Yanklovich’s *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, and Slater’s *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*.

The people I have been describing in this book are the families that live in these suburbs and live these lives, and it is possible that the isolation described here is in part responsible for the expressed wishes of some of my respondents for more "community." Symbolic ethnicity fulfills this particularly American need to be "from somewhere." Having an ethnic identity is something that makes you both special and simultaneously part of a community. It is something that comes to you involuntarily through heredity, and at the same time it is a personal choice. And it allows you to express your individuality in a way that does not make you stand out as in any way different from all kinds of other people. In short, symbolic ethnic identity is the answer to a dilemma that has deep roots in American culture.

THE ELEMENT OF CHOICE

Symbolic ethnicity was appealing to my respondents for another reason as well—the element of choice involved. In a contemporary study of the strategies of successful advertising campaigns devised by Madison Avenue firms, William O. Beeman describes how clever advertisers devise ad campaigns that appeal simultaneously to the opposite values of individuality and conformity. He adds another important theme, freedom of choice. Freedom of choice, writes Beeman, quoting the advertisers, "comes close to being sacred for Americans." People must be persuaded that they are meeting contradictory goals in selecting the advertiser's product: making a choice that shows their individuality while at the same time giving them membership in a group—the group of people who have made the same choice. He writes:

In the United States, through exercise of individual choice, people not only demonstrate their uniqueness, they also recognize and actualize their integration with others. They do this by making, acknowledging, and perpetuating social ties based solely on the affinity that arises through making the same choices. (Beeman 1986, 59)

Of course, it is the job of the advertiser to convince people that purchasing a product makes them part of a group. The group of people one feels a part of may not exist in any real sense as a group, existing only within the framework of the advertisement itself: "By buying a Pepsi you take place in an exchange, not only of money, but of yourself as a Pepsi person. You have become special, yet one of a

clan: however, you do not meet those others, except *in* the advertisement" (Williamson 1978, 53).

Beeman claims that advertisers who create successful campaigns based on combining these American values have a very persuasive and attractive package prepared for the target audience. In fact, he describes it as a surefire recipe for success:

These double messages are remarkable in that they tell consumers they can achieve contradictory but laudable goals merely by exercising choice on a microcosmic level. Every time we choose one brand of liquid detergent or motor oil over another, we are subtly being told both: "you are unique and special" and "you are in the company of the millions of others who choose this." This is the opposite of a no-win situation. It is an always-win situation in cognitive terms, and it is as powerful as it is subtle. (Beeman 1986, 64)

I have been describing symbolic ethnicity throughout this book as embodying a great deal of choice. Even among those who have a homogeneous background and do not need to choose an ancestry to identify with, it is clear that people do choose to keep an ethnic identity. And until recently many social scientists who have attempted to understand this persistence of ethnic identity have looked at the nature of the particular ethnic groups—extolling the virtue of particular strands of the ethnic culture worth preserving. Yet if one looks at ethnicity almost as though it were a product one would purchase in the marketplace—Stein and Hill's "dime store" ethnics—one can see that symbolic ethnic identity is an attractive product.

The choice to have a symbolic ethnicity—in all the ways I have described—is an attractive and widespread one despite its lack of demonstrable content, because having a symbolic ethnicity combines individuality with feelings both of community and of conformity through an exercise of personal choice. These themes recur throughout my interviews.

Part of the reason that ethnicity is so appealing to people is evident in the reasons people give to the question of *why* they "like being ethnic." Being ethnic makes them feel unique and special and not just "vanilla," as one respondent put it. They are not like everyone else. At the same time, being ethnic gives them a sense of belonging to a collectivity. It is the best of all worlds: they can claim to be unique and special while simultaneously finding the community and conformity with others that they also crave. But that "community" is of a type that will not interfere with a person's individuality. The closest

this type of ethnic identity brings a person to “group activity” is something like a Saint Patrick’s Day parade. It is not as if these people belong to ethnic voluntary organizations or gather as a group in churches or neighborhood or union halls. They work and reside within the mainstream of American middle-class life, yet they retain the interesting benefits—the “specialness” of ethnic allegiance.

An exaggerated way of examining the reasons behind these choices is through a question I asked that freed respondents from any constraint based on the belief that ethnicity is inherited. I asked people, “If you could be a member of any ethnic group you wanted, which one would you choose?” It is clear from the answers that having an ethnic identity gives people a feeling of “specialness” and fulfills a longing for community. Liz Field articulates this “hunger for ethnicity”:

I would like to be a member of a group that is living a culture, like on an American Indian reservation, or a gypsy encampment...or an Italian neighborhood. Where there is some meat to the culture. Mine was very wishy-washy. There was not much to make it strong and appealing. It was just supposed to be this thin little rod in the back of my spine. Scotch Irish. It was thin. It was diluted. I would like to be in a rich cultural society. I don’t know which one it would be. Whichever one is the richest... Where they have a tight familial structure of aunts and uncles and cousins. And they all know their second cousins intimately and they are all involved in each other’s lives. Which didn’t happen to me. Although cousins lived nearby, we weren’t tight. We didn’t know if they were in town. We were just not as aware of them as I think other ethnic groups are, the ones that are rich and the ones that are tight. It could be Alaskan Eskimo. I mean, I am on my own here. I don’t have that many friends. I do my work. I play my instrument. I travel a lot. But I don’t have a big cultural... People who have stayed where they grew up have a larger cultural... Well, I don’t even have it at home, where my mother lives. It has just not been there for me, ever. The kind of thing where you know everybody and you know all the back roads. There is a richness there. Maybe that is what draws me to some rich, thick, culture. [Laughs.] But flexible too, open to new ideas. [Laughs again.]

What Liz Field ironically adds at the end of her description of the “thick culture” she craves shows that even those who hunger for a romanticized version of an all-encompassing ethnic community realize that they only want the positive aspects of that community. Liz wants the warmth of a close community without the restrictions that she admits usually accompany such a community. But while Liz fantasizes that the warmth and familial ties missing from her own life

would be present if she were American Indian or a gypsy, in fact, the situation she describes is precisely what a symbolic ethnic identity gives to middle-class Americans—a sense of rich culture through a community with no cost to the other contradictory values we also crave: individuality, flexibility, and openness to new ideas.

In fact the very idea that Americans have of “community” is very much tied up in their minds with ethnicity. Ethnicity is sometimes defined as family writ large. The image that people conjure up of “community” is in part one based on common origins and interests. The concrete nature of those images in America is likely to be something like a small town or an ethnic ghetto, while in many other parts of the world this sense of peoplehood or community might be realized through nationalist feelings. As noted in chapter 3, the idea of being “American” does not give people a sense of one large family, the way that being French does for people in France. In America, rather than conjuring up an image of nationhood to meet this desire, ethnic images are called forth.

The immensely popular book *Habits of the Heart* exemplifies the invocation of ethnicity as an example of community. The authors diagnose the problems with Americans as stemming from a lack of community—a community that people really want, but lack even a language to talk about, because it challenges the independence they have traditionally valued. Bellah et al. mourn the passing of the strong ethnic ties that vanish as Americans move into the middle class. They cite in contrast “ethnic and racial communities, each with its own story and its own heroes and heroines” as examples of “genuine communities” of memory (p. 153). The optimal solution for Bellah et al. would be if people belonged to a community of memory—a community people do not “choose,” but are born into, where people inherit a commitment to traditional ties.²

The “thick culture” and tradition that Liz Field described is in Americans’ minds associated with strong ethnic groups. But Liz has recognized the crucial point that precisely what we crave about

2. If Americans cannot have that type of community, the authors of *Habits of the Heart* suggest, the next best thing for people to do is to go back to church. Wilkinson notes that Bellah et al. do not tell their readers that “such communities can be oppressive, snoopy, and stultifying. Conversely, they underestimate the satisfactions of being able to create and select one’s social networks, and the sheer vitality of association that comes from working at it out of a fear of being isolated” (Wilkinson 1984, 44). Wilkinson’s direct answer to such solutions is, I think, absolutely correct and is also echoed in the remarks just quoted from Liz Field.

community and tradition is also tied to things we don't crave—conformity, lack of change, and rigidity. The maintenance of boundaries around a community involves costs to the individuals inside as well as providing the benefits of nurturance and security. Community seen one way is warm and nurturing; seen another, it is stifling and constricting.

This is the essential contradiction in American culture between individuality and community. Thus Liz Field's ironic comment that she wanted a thick culture that was also flexible and open to new ideas indicates the fact that she is very American. She wants both. And I think this is the best way to understand the symbolic ethnicity I have described—it gives middle-class Americans at least the appearance of both: conformity with individuality; community with social change. And as an added bonus—which almost ensures its appeal to Americans—the element of choice is also there. Ethnicity has a built-in sense of appeal for Americans that should make Coke and Pepsi envious. Madison Avenue could not have conspired to make a better and more appealing product. This partly explains the patterns in the choices people make about their ethnic identities. When given a choice, whites will choose the most "ethnic" of the ancestries in their backgrounds.

Over and over again people told me that they liked keeping an ethnic identity because it gave them a sense of who they were, where they had come from, and, as one respondent said, made them "more interesting." And the more unusual your ancestry sounds, the more "interesting" you are. Cindy Betz:

I work in an office and a lot of people in there always talk about their background. It's weird because it is a big office and people are of all different backgrounds. People are this or that. It is interesting I think to find out. Especially when it is something that you don't hear a lot about. Something that is not common like Lithuania or something. That's the good part about being Czech. People think it is something different.

Joe Bajko felt that being Lithuanian made him feel special:

It's nice to feel that you are one of a thousand. You are not exactly in a big crowd. In fact, rarely do you find any Lithuanians around. It's nice to feel that you are in an elite group. Like in grade school, when everyone would brag, like saying, "I'm Italian," I would say, "I'm Lithuanian."

Those who don't have a strong ethnic identity or who don't have an ancestry in their past that makes them feel special or interesting

feel as though they should at least hold on to what they do have. Ted Jackson:

It gives you something to identify with. Lets you know where you are coming from. Something to hold on to. It is something that no one can take away from you. Something that is all yours... When everyone else has something. And if you are not Italian, or whatever, and you don't have these strong ethnic identities or just things that come with it—all these celebrations and activities and all that...if you don't have that and everyone else is going here and going there...it makes you feel kind of left out. Yeah, I really do think you have to have something.

Again and again the same message comes through. You have to have something you can identify with. If it is a "special" ethnicity, you can be interesting or elite, but nevertheless you must have something. And if, like Ted Jackson, the identity you have to hold on to is being part Irish, French, Scottish, German, and English, you celebrate and hold on to that identity. In Ted's case he says he feels closest to the French part, but it is the maintenance of an identity, any identity, that people strive for. Again Liz Field describes why her ethnicity, even though it is not of a rich culture, is so important to her:

While I don't feel that my ethnic heritage needs to be dominant in my awareness, I do have an awareness of it and I am encouraged to learn a bit more about the type of people I may have come from. The type of traditions that I might have way back there somehow gotten exposed to. By knowing OK, I am X and X, or XY and Z. Then I don't have to pay any more attention to it. If you know what I mean. It's like OK, there, that is solved now. And you move on. It's important to be something. I need an awful lot of help in defining myself and that is a tool. A piece of information that puts a boundary on things.

Symbolic ethnicity is thus not something that will easily or quickly disappear, while at the same time it does not need very much to sustain it. The choice itself—a community without cost and a specialness that comes to you just by virtue of being born—is a potent combination.

SYMBOLIC ETHNICITY AND RACE

But what of the consequences of this symbolic ethnicity? Is it a harmless way for Saturday suburban ethnics to feel connected and special? Is it a useful way to unite Americans by reminding us that we

are all descended from immigrants who had a hard time and sacrificed a bit? Is it a lovely way to show that all cultures can coexist and that the pluralist values of diversity and tolerance are alive and well in the United States?

The answer is yes and maybe no. Because aside from all of the positive, amusing, and creative aspects to this celebration of roots and ethnicity, there is a subtle way in which this ethnicity has consequences for American race relations. After all, in much of this discussion the implicit and sometimes explicit comparison for this symbolic ethnicity has been the social reality of racial and ethnic identities of America's minority groups. For the ways in which ethnicity is flexible and symbolic and voluntary for white middle-class Americans are the very ways in which it is not so for non-white and Hispanic Americans.

Thus the discussions of the influence of looks and surname on ethnic choice would look very different if one were describing a person who was one-quarter Italian and three-quarters African-American or a woman whose married name changed from O'Connell to Martinez. The social and political consequences of being Asian or Hispanic or black are not symbolic for the most part, or voluntary. They are real and often hurtful.

So for all of the ways in which I have shown that ethnicity does not matter for white Americans, I could show how it does still matter very much for non-whites. Who your ancestors are does affect your choice of spouse, where you live, what job you have, who your friends are, and what your chances are for success in American society, if those ancestors happen not to have been from Europe. Whether this is a temporary situation, and the experience of non-whites in America will follow the same progression as the experience of these white ethnic groups, has been one of the central questions in American social science writing on this subject. The question, then, of whether ethnic groups such as Italians and Poles are in some way the same as minority groups such as Chicanos and blacks is a complicated one—both analytically and politically. Analytically, social scientists have tried to assess the assimilation process of white ethnics and non-white groups to ascertain whether the American opportunity structure will open up for non-whites. Politically, this issue is also an important one—especially with the development of affirmative action legislation and the Voting Rights Act, which moved to provide legal protection and special attention to what were defined as “minority groups”

subject to discrimination, as opposed to ethnic groups who were not. Stephen Steinberg (1981) and others writing on the ethnic revival of the 1970s argue quite strongly that the self-conscious organization of white ethnics on the basis of their ethnicity was a racist response to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s and to celebrations of racial and ethnic identities by non-white groups.

Michael Novak, author of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, was the conservative leader of the white ethnic movement of the 1970s. He tries to answer the criticism that white ethnics are anti-black and “going back to their ethnicity” in order to oppose the black power movement. He writes: “The new ethnicity is the nation's best hope for confronting racial hatred. A Pole who knows he is a Pole, who is proud to be a Pole, who knows the social costs and possibilities of being a Polish worker in America, who knows where he stands in power, status and integrity—such a Pole can face a black militant eye to eye” (Novak 1973, 294). Novak really could not have been more wrong here, but not only for the most obvious reason. In the context of the content of the rest of his book and the debates of the early 1970s, Novak was wrong because the “new white ethnics” were in opposition to the black power movement, and various other developments that came out of the civil rights movement. And Novak's own work was read then and can be read now as fanning the flames of racial division at the time.

But the other sense in which Novak is wrong in this passage is in part a result of some of the developments of the new ethnicity movement of the 1970s. A Polish-American who “knows he is a Pole, who is proud to be a Pole, who knows the social costs and possibilities of being a Polish worker” is less able to understand the experience of being black in America precisely because of being “in touch with his own ethnicity.” That is because the nature of being a Pole in America is as I have described it throughout this book—lacking in social costs, providing enjoyment, and chosen voluntarily.

One of the major points of this book has been the disparity between the idea and the reality of ethnicity for white ethnics. The reality is that white ethnics have a lot more choice and room for maneuver than they themselves think they do. The situation is very different for members of racial minorities, whose lives are strongly influenced by their race or national origin regardless of how much they may choose not to identify themselves in ethnic or racial terms. Yet my respondents did not make a distinction between their own

experience of ethnicity as a personal choice and the experience of being a member of a racial minority.

People who assert a symbolic ethnicity do not give much attention to the ease with which they are able to slip in and out of their ethnic roles. It is quite natural to them that in the greater part of their lives, their ethnicity does not matter. They also take for granted that when it does matter, it is largely a matter of personal choice and a source of pleasure.

The fact that ethnicity is something that is enjoyed and will not cause problems for the individual is something people just accept. This also leads to the belief that all ancestries are equal—more or less interchangeable, but that you should be proud of and enjoy the one you have. Louise Taylor articulated this attitude:

You have to be something. I am sure I would be happy with whatever I was. It is like matter, mass, you have to come from somewhere. I could not imagine myself being unhappy with anything. . . I am sure if I was Swedish and Japanese combination. . . the feelings of happiness and self-esteem would be the same.

The sentiment among my respondents was that people should be proud of their heritage, whatever it is. And because they happened to be Irish or Polish or Italian, they were proud to be Irish or Italian or Polish. But they could just as easily have been something different. Ellen Albert:

Q: Would you say that being Irish is important to you now?

A: Well, I don't know. I have fun being it. I would not know what to say. I have never been anything else. I am proud of it, but I am not really 100 percent anyway. And my husband, he doesn't have a drop in him and you should see him on Saint Patrick's Day.

This approach to their own ethnicity leads to a situation where whites with a symbolic ethnicity are unable to understand the everyday influence and importance of skin color and racial minority status for members of minority groups in the United States. This lack of understanding of the difference between the experience of ethnicity for white Americans and the implications of ethnicity for members of racial minorities was made quite clear in an interchange in the "Dear Abby" newspaper column. The following debate is between two Irish-Americans and two Asian-Americans on the issue of whether or not it is polite to inquire about an individual's ethnic background. The

Irish-Americans cannot understand why the Asian-Americans are offended:

Dear Abby,

Regarding "100 Percent American," the American of Oriental descent who complained that within five minutes of being introduced to a Caucasian, he was asked, "What are you?": You replied that it was rude to ask personal questions at any time, but because the average Caucasian doesn't know a Chinese from a Japanese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Korean or a Thai, the question seemed reasonable—but it was still rude.

Rude? I disagree. Inquiries about a person's roots are not necessarily rude. It shows a sincere interest in their heritage.

The Orient is a rich and diverse geography. The face of an Oriental reveals his heritage. His looks tell of a passage through villages, cultures and languages—but which ones? His story is probably quite fascinating. I don't think it is rude to observe that such a face has a rich ancestry. I think it is a positive component of international understanding.

AN AMERICAN NAMED FINN

Abby replied:

My mail was heavy on this one. Without exception, all writers of Oriental descent resented being asked, "What are you?" shortly after being introduced. A typical letter:

Dear Abby,

I, too, am 100 percent American and because I am of Asian ancestry, I am often asked, "What are you?" It's not the personal nature of this question that bothers me, it's the question itself. This query seems to question my very humanity. "What am I?" Why I am a person like everyone else!

Another question I am frequently asked is, "Where did you come from?" This would be an innocent question, when one Caucasian asks it of another, but when it is asked of an Asian, it takes on a different tone. . .

A REAL AMERICAN

Dear Abby,

Why do people resent being asked what they are? The Irish are so proud of being Irish, they tell you before you even ask. Tip O'Neill has never tried to hide his Irish ancestry.

JIMMY

(*San Francisco Chronicle*, February 28, 1986)

I was struck when I read this by how well it summarized the ways in which I found that the symbolic ethnicity of my respondents related to their ideas about racial minorities in our society. "An American

Named Finn" cannot understand why Asians are not as happy to be asked about their ancestry as he is because he understands his ethnicity and theirs to be separate but equal. Everyone has to come from somewhere—his family from Ireland, another's family from Asia—each has a history and each should be proud of it. But the reason he cannot understand the perspective of the Asian-American is that all ethnicities are not equal, all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary. And that is where the subtle effect of symbolic ethnicity on American race relations develops.

The people I interviewed were not involved in ethnic organizations and were not self-consciously organized on the basis of their ethnicity. However, I do think that the way they experience their ethnicity creates a climate leading to a lack of understanding of the ethnic or racial experience of others. People equated their European ancestral background with the backgrounds of people from minority groups and saw them as interchangeable.

Thus respondents told me they just did not see why blacks and Mexican-Americans were always blaming things on their race or their ethnicity. For instance, Bill McGowan:

A lot of people have problems that they bring on themselves. I don't care what religion or what nationality they are. The Mexicans, a lot of times they will say, "Well, it is because I am Mexican that it is much harder." But if they were Irish they might have the same problems. People are people.

Barbara Richter:

I think black people still do face discrimination to a point. But when other people come to this country with half a brain in their head and some industrious energy and they make it on their own after a while, I just think the opportunities are there for everyone.

Sean O'Brien:

I think everybody has the same opportunity. It doesn't matter what their background is. The education is there and if they have the gumption to go after it, they can do anything they damn well please. It doesn't make any difference if they are Irish, German, Jewish, Italian, or black. There are all different groups who are multi-millionaires. They have the same opportunities. I think a black kid has the same opportunity as one of my own.

Tim McDaniel:

I think black people and Hispanic people face discrimination. Definitely. I think a lot of it they bring on themselves. They talk too much about it. If they would let it go it would be better.

Others denied, especially, that blacks were experiencing discrimination, citing examples of when affirmative action policies had hurt them or their families as "reverse discrimination." Megan O'Keefe:

I never saw blacks being discriminated against at all. Now whether they are or not, maybe it is true. But I have seen a lot of the reverse. I have seen a lot of reverse discrimination.

Part of the tradition handed down as part of an ethnic ancestry are the family stories about ancestors having faced discrimination in the past. In fact, a large part of what people want to pass on to their children is the history of discrimination and struggle that ancestors faced when first arriving in the United States. All of my respondents were sure that their ancestors had faced discrimination when they first came to the United States. Many had heard stories about it within their families, some had read about it in history books, but all were sure it had happened. It was also one of the most important things mentioned to me by parents when they talked about what they wanted their children to know about their ethnic ancestry. For instance, Elaine Williams wanted her children to know about the hardships associated with their Italian ancestry:

I just want them to know who they are and appreciate where they came from. I like them to talk to my older aunts. Sometimes they will tell them stories about when they were in Italy. Things like that. Because I don't think my kids know any hardship. Not that I know a lot, but I think it is nice to know the things people went through to put you where you are.

This is interesting, because Elaine herself did not think that her family had experienced much hardship until her father told her some stories one day at dinner:

About four or five months ago we had a discussion at dinner about this. I had said that I never thought I had been prejudiced against because I was Italian. My dad went into a tirade about how back then it was much more common. He told us about different things that happened to him and just the general attitude toward Italians. It kind of stunned me because I had never experienced that. But my dad says that just because I didn't live through it, I should know that there was more anti-Italian feelings back when he was younger.

Most people had heard stories about how their ancestors had faced discrimination in the past. Rich Cahill, a 29-year-old policeman, described what he had heard in his family: "I know my grandmother

used to tell me that there used to be signs in different places saying 'Irish need not apply.' In Philadelphia and down at the shore." Judy Gilligan spoke of the problem faced by her Serbian ancestors: "They talked about fights they had with other kids on the street, and being called guinea, honky. Those kinds of names. My grandparents told me the stories about how during the depression their milk box would be raided. People would come steal their milk."

People were all aware of the fact that their ancestors had come here as immigrants to make a better life and that they had faced adversity to do it—and they often pointed to the similarities between the experience of their ancestors and the discrimination experienced by non-whites now. Carol Davis's image of what it used to be like for the Irish is perhaps the most affected by being seen through the prism of the civil rights movement:

Q: Did your ancestors face discrimination when they first came here?

A: Yes, from what I was told they were. I know that Irish people were treated almost like blacks for a while. They weren't allowed in certain buildings. They were discriminated against. From what my mother says there were even signs in Philadelphia for Irish people not to come into the restaurants. I think they were even forced to ride in the back of the bus for a while there.

This type of interpretation of history contributes to the problems middle-class Americans of European origin have in understanding the experiences of their contemporary non-white fellow citizens.³ The idea that the Irish were forced to sit at the back of a bus (when, in 1840?) in a sense could be seen to bring people together. The message of such a belief is that all ethnicities are similar and all will eventually end up successful. If the Irish had to sit at the back of the bus sometime in the past, and now being Irish just means having fun at funerals, then there is hope for all groups facing discrimination now. But, of course, if the Irish did not need legislation to allow them into

3. I do not want to minimize the Irish experience of discrimination and hostility in America in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. There was a great deal of anti-Irish feeling and discrimination, especially in Boston, New York, and other East Coast cities. However, the negative experiences of the Irish were never as extreme or as long lived as the discrimination and violence experienced by blacks and American Indians. (For detailed discussions of the different experiences of America's white and non-white groups see Lieberman 1980 and Blauner 1972.) In the case of Carol Davis's understanding of this situation, it is clear that she is interpreting her knowledge of the experiences of discrimination of the American Irish through her experience of the civil rights movement of American blacks.

the front of the bus, then why do blacks? If the Irish could triumph over hardships and discrimination through individual initiative and hard work, then why the need for affirmative action and civil rights legislation?

It is clear that people have a sense that being an immigrant was hard, that society did not accept their groups, and that now discrimination and prejudice is much less than it was before. People also believe that blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are still in a somewhat earlier stage. But, on the other hand, beliefs that the discrimination faced by Irish, Italians, and Serbs was the same both in degree and in kind as that faced by non-whites sets the stage for resentment of any policies that single out racial minorities.

The way in which they think about their own ethnicity—the voluntary, enjoyable aspects of it—makes it difficult to understand the contemporary position of non-whites. Thus some people made it a point to assert their ethnic identity on forms or in situations where forms or institutions were trying to determine minority status. For instance, Patrick O'Connor answered that he would put "Irish" as his answer to the ancestry question on the census form. But then he volunteered that that is not the only place he puts "Irish": "In fact, I put 'Irish' on all sorts of forms when they ask for racial identity. They want black or white, I always put 'Irish.' Let them figure out what it means." Lisa Paulo also gives her ethnicity on forms she knows are not specifically asking for it:

On those forms it usually is, "Oh, you are Portuguese," therefore you have to be white Caucasian and so it usually gets pushed aside. And I usually feel more upset that it gets pushed aside than anything else. If you have a special category for Afro-American and for Filipino-American why can't you have one for Portuguese? I will mark "Other" and then just write in "Portuguese," because I get tired of being white Caucasian.

But most respondents no longer saw their ethnicity as having that much influence on their lives anymore. For most people I spoke with, ethnicity is something everyone has to have, but why would people be particularly proud of their ethnic ancestry or ashamed of it? It is just something you have, not something that really influences your life. Most respondents would admit that there was something different about blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, that they had faced some societal discrimination, especially in the past, but in another sense the individualistic approach to ethnicity was a much stronger influence. Some people stressed that they thought all societal discrimination

against blacks and Hispanics had lessened to the point where they should just start forgetting about it and act as individuals, not as groups. In short, if your own ethnicity is a voluntaristic personal matter, it is sometimes difficult to understand that race or ethnicity for others is influenced by societal and political components.

In this sense the process and content of symbolic ethnicity tend to reinforce one another. If invoking an ethnic background is increasingly a voluntary, individual decision, and if it is understood that invoking that background is done for the enjoyment of the personality traits or rituals that one associates with one's ethnicity, then ethnicity itself takes on certain individual and positive connotations. The process and content of a symbolic ethnicity then make it increasingly difficult for white ethnics to sympathize with or understand the experience of a non-symbolic ethnicity—the experience of racial minorities in the United States.

THE FUTURE OF SYMBOLIC ETHNICITY

This analysis suggests both that symbolic ethnicity persists because it meets a need Americans have for community without individual cost and that a potential societal cost of this symbolic ethnicity is in its subtle reinforcement of racism. Perhaps this is an inherent danger in any pluralist society. The celebration of the fact that we all have heritages implies an equality among those heritages. This would obscure the fact that the experiences of non-whites have been qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of whites.

It is true that at the turn of the century Italians were considered by some to be non-whites. It is also true that there were signs in many East Coast cities prohibiting the Irish from applying for jobs or entering establishments. The discrimination faced by Jews was even greater. They were excluded from certain neighborhoods, organizations, and occupations. Yet the degree of discrimination against white European immigrants and their children never matched the systematic, legal and official discrimination and violence experienced by blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in America. The fact that whites of European ancestry today can enjoy an ethnicity that gives them options and brings them enjoyment with little or no social cost is no small accomplishment. But does it mean that in time we shall have a pluralist society with symbolic ethnicity for all Americans?

The respondents described in this study are socially mobile, mid-

dle-class whites, and their type of ethnic identity is specific to their social situation. As the description of the experiences of southern and eastern European immigrants at the beginning of the book suggests, the experience of ethnicity would have been very different at the turn of the century. This is a crucial aspect of ethnicity that is important to remember—ethnicity is historically variable. In the past it had social costs associated with it for these white groups. It has few, if any, now.

However, this symbolic ethnicity is not just something associated with generational movement. It is also very much dependent on social mobility. As long as racial or ethnic identity is associated with class stratification, or as long as ascriptive characteristics are used to assign rewards in society, ethnic identity will be much more complex than individual choice and selective personal and familial enjoyment of tradition.

The effects of changes in American immigration law make it difficult at times to distinguish developments owing to generational mobility from those owing to social and economic mobility. This is because the social and economic mobility of white ethnics in the twentieth century coincided with the drastic reduction in immigration from European sources—which means that the cohorts of Poles and Italians advancing socially and generationally have not been followed by large numbers of fresh immigrants who take over unskilled jobs and populate ethnic ghettos. Thus when the socially mobile children and grandchildren of the original immigrants left the urban ghettos and unskilled jobs for college and the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians took their places. The social mobility that makes a symbolic ethnicity possible for these whites might have looked very different if the supply of new immigrants from Europe had not been drastically curtailed.

This also makes it difficult to generalize from the experience of these white ethnic groups to the experiences of the largely non-European immigrants arriving since the 1965 immigration law. There is definitely evidence of social mobility and increasing intermarriage among the second- and among the small number of third-generation Asian-Americans. There is also evidence of social mobility and intermarriage among Hispanics. However, both of these groups are different from groups of European origin in that there is a continuing supply of new immigrants who take the place of the older generations in the ethnic neighborhoods and occupations. Middle-class third-generation Mexican-Americans may enjoy some of the same intermittent

and voluntary aspects of ethnic identity as Italian-Americans, but the existence of a strong first-generation ethnic community, as well as of continued discrimination in housing and employment against Hispanics, would probably impose constraints on such upwardly mobile third-generation Mexican-Americans that it would not on Italian-Americans.

Aside from the very crucial issue of eradicating racial discrimination—which is still an inescapable fact of life for those of non-European descent in the United States—the question of the development of this type of symbolic ethnicity among these new immigrant groups is open because of the fact that they are at the forefront of a still-active immigrant stream. As these new groups—such as Chinese, Koreans, Jamaicans, and Filipinos—move into the third generation and into middle-class suburbs, more studies such as this one should be done on the later-generation form of ethnicity.

Given the fact that the structural conditions and trends that give rise to symbolic ethnicity are continuing, I would expect that symbolic ethnicity will continue to characterize the ethnicity of later-generation whites. The individual and familial construction of the substance of that ethnicity, along with increasing intermarriage, means that the shared content of any one ethnicity will become even more diluted. Consequently there will be increased dependence on the mass media, ethnic stereotypes, and popular culture to tell people how to be Irish or Italian or Polish.

But that dilution of the content of ethnicity does not necessarily mean that there will be a decline in the personal satisfaction associated with having a symbolic ethnicity. Partly this is because the contentless nature of this ethnicity enables it to provide the feeling of community with no cost to the individuality we Americans value so highly. But it is also because this ethnicity is associated by people with close and intimate ties in their nuclear families, in fragments of their extended families, and with close friends and neighbors. The Saint Patrick's Day parties I attended with my respondents may not have had too much to do with being Irish, and the people giving them may have had very little Irish in their complicated family trees, but the parties were warm and rich celebrations, which embody traditions for the people who gather each year. The "community" that gathers for these celebrations is not necessarily illusory, but it is a voluntary, personally constructed, American creation.

The paradox of symbolic ethnicity is that it depends upon the

ultimate goal of a pluralist society and at the same time makes it more difficult to achieve that ultimate goal. It is dependent upon the concept that all ethnicities mean the same thing—that enjoying the traditions of one's heritage is an option available to a group or individual—but that such a heritage should not have any social costs associated with it. The options of symbolic ethnicity involve choosing among elements in one's ancestry and choosing when and if voluntarily to enjoy the traditions of that ancestry. However, the interviews presented here show that the individuals who enjoy a symbolic ethnicity for themselves do not always recognize the options they enjoy or the ways in which their own concepts of ethnicity and uses of those concepts constrain and deny choice to others.

Americans who have a symbolic ethnicity continue to think of ethnicity—as well as race—as being biologically rooted. They enjoy many choices themselves, but they continue to ascribe identities to others—especially those they can identify by skin color. Thus a person with a black skin who had some Irish ancestry would have to work very hard to decide to present him or herself as Irish—and in many important ways he/she would be denied that option. The discussion of racial intermarriage makes this point clearly—racial identity is understood by these respondents as an inherited physical aspect of an individual, not as a social construct. Thus respondents exhibit contradictory ideas about minorities in American society—they are clear that there is a fundamental difference between a white ethnic and a black person when the issue is intermarriage in their own families. On the other hand, they do not understand why blacks seem to make such a big deal about their ethnicity. They see an equivalence between the African-American and, say, Polish-American heritages.

So symbolic ethnicity only works for some ancestries—the pluralist ideal of an equality of heritages is far from a reality in American life. But at the same time, as I have argued, the legacy of symbolic ethnicity is to imply that this equality exists. The political result of that ideological legacy is a backlash against affirmative action programs that recognize and try to redress the inequalities in our society.

The ultimate goal of a pluralist society should be a situation of symbolic ethnicity for all Americans. If all Americans were free to exercise their "ethnic option" with the certainty that there would be no costs associated with it, we could all enjoy the voluntary, pleasurable aspects of ethnic traditions in the way my respondents describe their own enjoyments. It is important not to romanticize the tradi-