

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF ETHNICITY:
NATIVE AMERICAN ETHNIC RENEWAL

Joane Nagel

The salience of social identities, and particularly ethnic identities, to both individuals and groups has been powerfully reasserted over the past three decades. Over the same period, Nagel argues, political, social, and economic changes have redefined the meaning and “worth” of ethnicity. Among other factors, interethnic competition for power and resources has led to contests over ethnic self- and other-constructions, contests which have led to charges of fraud in ethnic self-identifications and the articulation of new standards for ethnic proof. Questions of authenticity, however, she observes, are not limited to matters of ethnicity, but also extend to other social realms, such as poverty, religiosity, and manliness. In these realms, too, the social recognition of identities and group memberships are by no means guaranteed.

Joane Nagel is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Kansas. She is the editor of several books, and author, most recently, of American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture.

The Paradox of Declining and Increasing Ethnicity

RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES remain important individual and collective characteristics in contemporary societies. The expectations of early post-Second-World-War social theorists that race and ethnicity would recede in favor of national identities in Western countries have not been met. The expectation was that as immigrant and indigenous groups participated in national institutions (churches, schools, voluntary associations) and the national economy, they would assimilate and adopt the dominant culture. Interestingly, there is indeed clear evidence of assimilation among second, third, and subsequent generations of immigrants in many Western countries, like the U.S., Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and France, to mention a few. As measured by such indicators as native language loss and national language acquisition, intermarriage, decline in traditional religious practices, the children and grandchildren of immigrants do seem to be integrating. However, during the past few decades, despite these signs of assimilation, we have also seen resurgences in racial, ethnic, and national identity, new organizational formation, and ethnic movements in most states around the world.

What can account for this apparent paradox of simultaneous declining and increasing ethnic identification and community? There have been several social, political, economic, and cultural processes at work during the post-war period that have combined with the processes and pressures for assimilation not only to maintain ethnic differences, but actually to increase ethnic diversity in many countries.

One factor has been global migration. Migration is the engine that produces new ethnic groups—migration can be internal, from rural to urban centers, or international, spanning national borders. In both cases—internal and international—ethnic communities and enclaves are formed, often in cities, that serve to build ethnic networks and self-awareness, that infuse in established communities new traditional ethnic membership, and that can create a backlash among dominant groups in response to a perceived ethnic “invasion.”

Another factor encouraging ethnic emergence of new groups and resurgence of established groups has been political policies that reinforce and recognize ethnicity as a basis for political claimsmaking. This politicization of ethnicity can occur for many reasons. The demand for political rights by one ethnic group can spread to other ethnic groups seeking similar rights or recognition. For instance, the U.S. African-American civil rights movement served as a model for ethnic movements among many other groups: Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans. Official political policies recognizing particular ethnic problems or extending ethnic rights can generate similar demands among other communities. For example, Canada's official recognition of the rights of French speakers led members of other language communities to seek language and cultural rights protections.

Another political factor can be ethnic representation in the political system. Electoral politics can lead to the development and articulation of ethnic-specific interests and result in strategies of ethnic bloc voting. Ethnic electoral competition can encourage ethnic mobilization as well as a shifting of ethnic boundaries from smaller groups (e.g., Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans) to larger identities and groups (e.g., Latinos, Hispanics). In some cases this takes the form of ethnic campaigns to get out the vote for a particular candidate. In other cases, it can result in more permanent, institutionalized forms of ethnic politics, such as ethnic political parties (e.g., Canada's Parti Québécois).

Ethnicity and economics are also linked in ways that can generate ethnic renewal and an increased self- and other-awareness of ethnic boundaries despite trends toward assimilation. Affirmative action policies are under attack in many countries, in such places as different as the U.S. and India, in part because of controversies about the representativeness or authenticity of ethnic candidates for affirmative action. Controversies can center on the class position of the individual (is s/he personally in need of affirmative action, even if s/he comes from a disadvantaged group?) or on the ethnic background of the individual (is s/he really a bonafide member of the

group in which membership is claimed?). Debates about individuals can often obfuscate persistent group inequalities, and “ethnicize” political discourse about ways to distribute political and economic resources fairly and strengthen ethnic identities on both sides of the debate.

Finally, there is a cultural value to ethnicity in many national settings. Despite the many negative costs borne by members of racial and ethnic communities (racism, discrimination, even genocide), in many contemporary societies there is a symbolic importance to having an ethnic identity. Sometimes this takes the form of recreational ethnicity where members of ethnic communities participate in festivals and fairs to celebrate a common ancestry and reenact shared traditions. Sometimes this takes a more serious or ceremonial form involving participation in religious or traditional practices, membership rituals, or self or collective rededications to ethnic community and lifeways. Just as it is a disadvantage in the modern world to be without a country, in many countries, one is adrift if one is without an ethnicity.

False Faces: Tensions between Self and Other Ethnic Claims

An important factor in understanding and accounting for these paradoxical patterns of declining and rising ethnicity in contemporary states is the way in which ethnicity is determined. Ethnicity is best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and group organization. The construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of both structure and agency—a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society. Ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions. Ethnic identity is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designa-

tions—i.e., what you think is your ethnicity versus what they think is your ethnicity. Since ethnicity changes situationally, the individual carries a portfolio of ethnic identities, which are more or less salient in various situations and vis-à-vis various audiences. As the audiences change, the socially-defined array of ethnic choices open to the individual changes. This produces a “layering” of ethnic identities that combines with the ascriptive character of ethnicity to reveal the negotiated, problematic nature of ethnic identity. Sometimes one or more of the identities an individual claims are questioned by others who assert that the individual is putting forth an ethnic false face.

When debates about ethnic authenticity arise, they are often caused by a lack of fit between internal and external ethnic identification regimes, between the individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ beliefs about the individual’s ethnicity. This tension is particularly ironic when it occurs in U.S. society because of the longstanding American tradition of and respect for self-invention. A central component of individual identity cosmology in American culture is the individual’s right to “starting over” and upward mobility: “Go west, young man” and seek your fortune and a new life (and a new identity). This presumed right to self-reinvention flies in the face of both informal and formal criteria for authentic ethnicity, such as the requirement that an individual have particular ancestry or other qualifications in order to claim membership in an ethnic group. For instance, many Americans claim to have some degree of American Indian ancestry. These ethnic self-identifications can be challenged by the U.S. federal government and by individual American Indian tribal governments, each of which has formal rules defining who is an Indian or a tribal member (e.g., particular degrees of “blood quantum,” Indian ancestry or tribal membership of one or both parents, residency on the reservation). These rules are often designed to protect severely limited tribal resources from claims by individuals making casual assertions of Indian identity.

It is not only when an individual’s ethnic identity is challenged by some official federal or tribal agency that personal and social ethnic

conundrums can result. Informal disputes about an individual's ethnicity can arise when there is a lack of fit between personal and collective beliefs about the appropriateness of a particular ethnic claim.

For instance, a number of years ago I taught a class in introductory sociology at a university in Ohio. When the course turned to the topic of racism and prejudice, one student disclosed his hatred of whites. The class was shocked since the student could not be distinguished from his white classmates except by his statement. Collective inquiry into the meaning of his comments revealed that the student was an American Indian of mixed Indian-white ancestry, raised on a reservation in South Dakota where he had lived until that academic year. While this explanation accounted for the student's attitudes toward whites, it did not render his ethnic declarations meaningful to the class. Their response was that he looked white, so why didn't he just discard the problematic ethnicity in favor of a more comfortable one? In their world there was no salient "Indian" ethnicity. The student's ethnic choice had no social resonance since there was no local "Indian" ethnic niche. The disjuncture between this individual's ethnic identity and the available social choices remained an unresolved problem that arose from time to time throughout the semester.

This young man's "ethnic troubles" provide us with a number of insights into the boundary processes surrounding individual ethnic identification. We can see the importance of this person's vision of his own ethnicity in shaping his ethnic identity. We can also see, however, the limits on individual ethnic choice that are imposed by outsiders, even in informal situations, and by the structure of imaginable ethnic categories available to individuals and audiences alike. Disputes about ethnic authenticity appear to be part of the ethnic boundary formation, maintenance, and change process. Authenticity controversies can arise over individual claims to ethnic ancestry or membership, over group claims to ethnic distinctiveness or rights reserved for particular ancestry or cultural communities, over the purity of particular ethnic products or objects or who has the right to control their disposition or marketing, and over the

rules for designating official ethnic groups and their rights. In the contemporary world, these debates are often politically regulated and often become official disputes that require adjudication in legal arenas.

It is important to note that questions of authenticity are not limited to the realm of ethnicity. We see authenticity of identity, behavior, or group membership challenged in other social realms as well: “Who is really poor?” “Who is really a Christian?” “Who is really a man?” Some of these inquiries into and challenges to claims of poverty, religiosity, or manliness are posed in official settings (e.g., in a welfare office), sometimes in unofficial settings (e.g., in church or on the sports field). Just as questions about ethnic authenticity can result from economic or political resource competition, problems of social fit, or simple misunderstandings about meanings and boundaries, so disputes over need, religion, gender, or doubts about some other individual characteristic or group membership can reflect both material and symbolic struggles. Whatever their origins or underlying motivations, these assertions and challenges all reflect the construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of identity and community. Thus, the search for “false faces” seems destined to continue to preoccupy postmodern society.