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## Assimilation of Immigrants

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### Abstract

This article reviews the evolution of the concept of assimilation in American social science. It distinguishes *assimilation* from *accommodation* as modal adaptation outcomes of different immigrant generations, as well as various aspects that are commonly conflated by the concept (cultural adaptations, economic mobility, social acceptance into a native mainstream); discusses interrelated cultural (subtractive and additive acculturation), structural (primary and secondary integration), and psychological (identification) dimensions of the concept; and describes the process of 'segmented assimilation' – how it is that different groups, in varying contexts of reception and incorporation, adapt to and are absorbed into different sectors of the society.

"What happens 'when peoples meet'?" was the question with which Milton Gordon (1964: p. 60) opened his seminal chapter on "The Nature of Assimilation," referring to the "processes and results ... of ethnic meetings in the modern world," which take place in a wide range of contexts from colonial conquest and military occupation to the displacement of indigenous peoples and to large-scale voluntary immigration. He identified seven 'variables' (or 'stages or subprocesses') of a complex 'assimilation process' to describe, in the American context, what happens to the 'sense of peoplehood' of ethnic groups, that is, of "groups defined by race, religion, and national origin, or some combination of these categories" (1964: pp. 27, 69–83).

International migrations produce profound social changes in both sending and receiving societies, in intergroup relations within receiving societies, and among the immigrants and their descendants. In varying contexts of reception, immigration is followed predictably not only by acculturative processes on the part of the immigrants, but also by varying degrees of acceptance, intolerance, or xenophobia about the alien newcomers on the part of the natives, which in turn shape the immigrants' own modes of adaptive response and sense of belonging. And immigration engenders ethnicity – collectivities who perceive themselves and are perceived by others to differ in language, religion, 'race,' national origin or ancestral homeland, cultural heritage, and memories of a shared historical past. Their modes of incorporation across generations may take a variety of forms – some leading to greater homogenization and solidarity within the society (or within segments of the society), others to greater ethnic differentiation and heterogeneity (Yinger, 1981, 1994; Massey and Sánchez, 2010). Those outcomes are shaped by the complex interaction of the (welcoming, neutral, or hostile) contexts of incorporation into which the immigrants are received by the society, and the resources and adaptations of the immigrants and their descendants (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

Assimilation is one such possible outcome. Sociologically, it has been defined as a multidimensional process of boundary reduction and brokering, which blurs or dissolves an ethnic distinction and the social and cultural differences and identities associated with it (Alba and Nee, 2003). At its hypothesized end point, formerly distinguishable ethnocultural groups become

effectively blended into one. At the group level, assimilation may involve the absorption of one or more minority groups into the mainstream, or the merging of minority groups – e.g., second-generation West Indians 'becoming black Americans.' At the individual level, assimilation denotes the cumulative changes that make individuals of one ethnic group more *acculturated*, *integrated*, and *identified* with the members of another.

Ideologically, the term has been used in the past to justify selective state-imposed policies aimed at the eradication of minority cultures and the 'benevolent' conquest of other peoples. Two notorious examples are the campaigns, encouraged by the Dawes Act of 1887, to Americanize, Christianize, and 'civilize' American Indian children by removing them from their families and immediate environments and moving them into boarding schools like the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania; and the 1898 'Benevolent Assimilation' policy of the United States to colonize and pacify the Philippines and quash its struggle for independence, pursuing an imperial interest under the guise of idealized purpose and beneficent intent (Miller, 1982). But the ideal of assimilation, more often tied to the metaphor of the 'melting pot,' has sought to dramatize, legitimize, and celebrate the consensual integration of immigrants and their descendants into a common national life – while ignoring the realities, inequalities, and potentialities of conflictual intergroup relations marked by enduring segregation, discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion.

In *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), their classic study of "the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City," Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan concluded that the concept of assimilation could not elucidate the complex realities of the nation's largest city:

To what does one assimilate in modern America? The 'American' in the abstract does not exist ... The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen ... The notion that the intense and unprecedented mixture of ethnic and religious groups in American life was soon to blend into a homogeneous end product has outlived its usefulness, and also its credibility. The persistent facts of ethnicity demand attention, understanding, and accommodation. (xcvii, 20, 290)

## Evolution of the Concept

In academic and colloquial usage, in social science, public policy, and popular culture, the idea and the ideal of 'assimilation' have had a checkered history. A protean concept, over time the term has conflated various empirical descriptions and normative prescriptions to make sense of the incorporation of 'ethnic' difference in American life. The concept is used to refer to once to cultural adaptations, economic mobility, patterns of settlement and intermarriage, and social acceptance into a changing native mainstream. After more than a century of use and misuse, the term itself remains elusive, confusing, and contentious. For a 'canonical' concept, there remains surprising ambiguity as to its meaning, measurement, and applicability.

The earliest uses of 'immigrant assimilation' confirm the sociologist Robert Park's observation that it was a metaphor derived from physiology to describe, as in a process of digestion and absorption, how "alien peoples come to be incorporated ... with a community or state" (1914: p. 611). As originally used, assimilation was a *transitive* verb, entailing the 'swallowing and digesting' (by the incorporating community or state, the subject of the action) of alien peoples (the object). Thus, a 19 May 1852 article in the newly founded *New York Times* observed that "The population of the United States is supplied by the world ... Assimilation in America, thanks to a healthy and useful digestion, is equal to the largest supplies of aliment ... Politically, the influx of life is only pernicious where the assimilative functions of labor and compensation are quiescent or disordered." A generation later, at the start of a new immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, the *Times* editorialized on 15 May 1880, that "There is a limit to our powers of assimilation and when it is exceeded the country suffers from something very like indigestion ... We know how stubbornly conservative of his dirt and ignorance is the average immigrant who settles in New York ... these wretched beings change their abode, but not their habits in coming to New York." By 9 August 1903, another *Times* editorial noted that "Little more than one half of the people of the country at the opening of the twentieth century are of American parentage ... Obviously the task of assimilation imposed on the American people is considerable." It was the 'American people' who did the assimilating; it was up to the 'Anglo-Saxon race' to absorb the foreigners.

In the twentieth century, 'assimilation' came increasingly, if almost imperceptibly, to be used as an *intransitive* verb. It was now the aliens who were the subject of the action of adapting and changing themselves to American cultural standards – 'acculturating,' as the process would later be called (Redfield et al., 1936) – and thereby embracing (or expected to embrace) a common national loyalty and identity. Already in Chicago in 1914, with immigration unabated and the large majority of its residents consisting of immigrants and their children, Robert Park (who saw the modern construction of national identities as entailing both the incorporative and acculturative modes of intergroup change) could write that:

In America it has become proverbial that a Pole, Lithuanian, or Norwegian cannot be distinguished, in the second generation,

from an American born of native parents ... As a matter of fact, the ease and rapidity with which aliens, under existing conditions in the United States, have been able to assimilate themselves to the customs and manners of American life have enabled this country to swallow and digest every sort of normal human difference, except the purely external ones, like color of the skin.

1914: p. 608

'Americanization' became the synonym of assimilation – all the more during the national mobilizations for '100 percent Americanism' spurred by World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and their aftermath (Higham, 1955). Popular usage reflected the dominant currents of thought of the times. The sociological concept of 'assimilation' was honed during an era of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and a mass 'new immigration' from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So was American sociology, especially in Chicago, which became a natural laboratory for the study of the immigrant and the city. Grand narratives, such as Emile Durkheim's depiction of the shift from 'mechanical' to 'organic solidarity' in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), sought to grasp the transition from premodern folk to modern industrial society; they undergird the subsequent development of functionalist theories of modernization. Progressive reforms, rooted in a belief in the human ability to improve social conditions, especially with the aid of experts and rational efficiency, sought to grapple with the attendant problems of large-scale social integration. The teleological notion of an endlessly improving future and positivist assumptions of linear progress were made credible by the rapid expansion of science, technology, and economic innovation. The idea of progress came to dominate the worldview of the entire culture. The ideal of assimilation reflects that optimism in progress as a universal law.

## Assimilation in American Sociology: Three Classic Formulations

The concept of assimilation seeks to grasp a contextual and not solely an individual reality that is complex, relational, and multidimensional. In what became arguably the most influential text ever published in the history of American sociology, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess gave the concept of assimilation its first classic definition: "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" ([1921]1924: p. 735). They distinguished systematically between 'four great types of interaction' – competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation – which they related respectively to economic, political, social, and cultural institutions. *Competition* and *conflict* sharpen ethnic boundaries and the consciousness of intergroup difference. An *accommodation* (of a conflict or to a new situation) may take place quickly, and the person or group is typically a highly conscious protagonist of the process of accommodating those circumstances. In *assimilation*, by contrast, the changes are more subtle and the

process is typically unconscious, so that the person is incorporated into the common life of the group largely unaware of how it happened. Assimilation is thus very unlikely to occur among immigrants who arrive as adults. Instead, *accommodation* most closely reflects the modal adaptation of first-generation adult immigrants, while *assimilation* can become a modal outcome ultimately only for the malleable young and for the second and third generations, and then only if and when permitted by structural conditions of inclusion at the primary group level.

*Assimilation* thus defined takes place most rapidly and completely in primary (intimate and intense) social contacts, including intermarriage. *Accommodation* may be facilitated through secondary contacts, but they are too distant and remote to promote assimilation. Since the nature (especially the interpersonal intimacy, 'the great moral solvent') of the social contacts is what is decisive, it follows that 'a common language is indispensable for the most intimate associations of the members of the group,' and its absence is 'an insurmountable barrier to assimilation,' since it is through communication that gradual and unconscious changes of the attitudes and sentiments of the members of the group are produced.

But – crucially – language and acculturation alone cannot ensure assimilation if a group is categorically segregated, racially classified, and 'regarded as in some sense a stranger, a representative of an alien race.' That is why, Park emphasized in a later encyclopedia article (1930: p. 282), the English-speaking Protestant "Negro, during his three hundred years in this country, has not been assimilated ... not because he has preserved in America a foreign culture and an alien tradition, for with the exception of the Indian ... no man in America is so entirely native to the soil." Race and place (i.e., racial discrimination and residential segregation) become critical structural determinants of the degree of assimilation or dissimilation precisely insofar as they delimit possible forms of primary social contact and heighten social contrasts and conflict. To be considered assimilated, it is not enough to acquire "the language and social ritual of the native community" – i.e., to be acculturated – but also to be able to "participate, without encountering prejudice, in the common life, economic and political" (1930: p. 281). A century later, much the same could be said of millions of highly acculturated undocumented immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere who are nonetheless excluded from the legal labor market and subject to systematic state persecution and unprecedented levels of deportations (Kanstroom, 2007; Ngai, 2005).

The 'melting pot' metaphor had been dismissed by Park and Burgess as a "magic crucible" notion of assimilation" where "the ideal of assimilation was conceived to be that of feeling, thinking, and acting alike" (1924: p. 735). The end result of assimilation is not 'like-mindedness,' but rather "a unity of experience and orientation, out of which may develop a community of purpose and action ... The extent and importance of the kind of homogeneity and 'like-mindedness' that individuals of the same nationality exhibit has been greatly exaggerated. Like-mindedness ... contributes little or nothing to national solidarity" (Park, 1914; reproduced in Park and Burgess, 1924: p. 759). Instead, Park and Burgess argued,

Not by the suppression of old memories, but by their incorporation in his new life is assimilation achieved ... Assimilation cannot be promoted directly, but only indirectly, that is, by supplying the conditions that make for participation. There is no process but life itself that can effectually wipe out the immigrant's memory of his past. The inclusion of the immigrant in our common life may perhaps best be reached, therefore, in cooperation that looks not so much to the past as to the future. The second generation of the immigrant may share fully in our memories, but practically all that we can ask of the foreign-born is participation in our ideals, our wishes, and our common enterprises.

1924: pp. 739–740

Ironically, despite his wide-ranging writings on many subjects, Park may be best known for the formulaic notion that assimilation is the final stage of a natural, progressive, inevitable, and irreversible 'race relations cycle.' But in a prolific career, Park only wrote about a 'race relations cycle' twice: first in a single sentence near the end of a 1926 article, "Our Racial Frontier in the Pacific"; then a decade later in a brief introduction to a book on interracial marriage in Hawaii written by one of his former students. In the first instance, he was arguing against the likelihood that a 'racial barrier' – which the passage of exclusionary laws sought to establish by barring Asian migration to the United States – could be much of a match against global economic, political, and cultural forces that have brought about "an existing interpenetration of peoples ... so vast and irresistible that the resulting changes assume the character of a cosmic process" (Park, 1926: pp. 141, 149). And in his 1937 introduction, he explicitly rebutted any notion of a unilinear assimilative outcome to race conflict and change ("what are popularly referred to as race relations"), arguing instead that when stabilization is finally achieved, race relations would assume one of three configurations: "They will take the form of a caste system, as in India; they will terminate in complete assimilation, as in China; or the unassimilated race will constitute a permanent racial minority within the limits of a national state, as in the case of the Jews in Europe ... All three types of change are involved ... in what we may describe as the 'race relations cycle'" (Park, 1937: xiii).

What has come to be called 'straight-line theory' (see Gans, 1992a,b) has little basis in the theories of Park or Gordon, as is often if mistakenly asserted, but gained traction from W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole's *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*, a definitive statement on the subject published in 1945. (The data, collected in the early 1930s, formed the basis of Srole's 1940 doctoral dissertation, "Ethnic Groups and American Society: A Study in the Dynamics of Social Assimilation.") They described the progressive advance of eight European-origin groups in the major status hierarchies of 'Yankee City' (Newburyport, Massachusetts): the Irish, French Canadians, Jews, Italians, Armenians, Greeks, Poles, and Russians. In the immigrant generation, all except the Jews had come from rural backgrounds. From the first chapter ("The Melting Pot," consisting of seven illustrative personal stories) to the last ("The American Ethnic Group"), the book systematically analyzed their spatial distribution, economic life, class system, family, church, language and the school, and associations, and spelled out a set of innovative methods for the study of ethnic groups.

Warner and Srole developed six-point linear indices to measure residential, occupational, and class status; and 'assimilation' and 'subordination' scales based on specific criteria to estimate the time for an entire group to disappear (the final result of assimilation), the proportionate number of people who drop out of a group in each generation, and the amount and kind of participation permitted members of the group by the 'host society.'

They explicitly linked upward social mobility to assimilation, which they saw as determined largely by the degree of ethnocultural (religion and language) and, above all, racial difference from the dominant group. While 'racial groups' were subordinated and excluded through caste restrictions on residential, occupational, associational, and marital choice, the clash of 'ethnic groups' with the dominant institutions of the host society was not much of a contest, particularly among the young. The industrial economy, the polity, the public school, popular culture, and the American family system all undercut and absorbed ethnicity in various ways, so that even when "the ethnic parent tries to orient the child to an ethnic past ... the child often insists on being more American than Americans" (1945: p. 284). For the upwardly mobile, with socioeconomic success came intermarriage and the further dilution of ethnicity. They concluded that "it is the degree of racial difference from the white American norms which counts most heavily in the placement of the group and in the determination of its assimilation"; absent such discrimination and structural inequalities, however, "the future of American ethnic groups seems to be limited; it is likely that they will be quickly absorbed" (pp. 294–295).

That general if qualified view of assimilation as linear progress, with sociocultural similarity and socioeconomic success marching in lock step, was reformulated by Milton Gordon in *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), published ironically on the eve of the beginning of the latest era of mass immigration to the United States – and of the denouement of the concept itself in the wake of the 1960s. From the opening sentence of the book, Gordon focused on the relational and contextual character of the process: "This book is concerned, ultimately, with problems of prejudice and discrimination arising out of differences in race, religion, and national background among the various groups, which make up the American people" (p. 3; emphasis added).

Although he meticulously reviewed a wide variety of definitions of 'assimilation' in the scholarly literature, he did not explicitly provide his own. Instead, he broke down the assimilation sequence into seven steps, of which 'identificational assimilation' – a self-image as an unhyphenated American – was the end point of a *hypothetical* process that began with cultural assimilation, proceeded through structural assimilation and intermarriage, and was accompanied by an absence of prejudice, discrimination, and value conflict in the 'core society.' Once structural assimilation occurred (i.e., extensive primary-level interaction with members of the 'core group'), either in tandem with or subsequent to acculturation, "the remaining types of assimilation have all taken place like a row of tenpins bowled over in rapid succession by a well-placed strike" (1964: p. 81). For the children of white European immigrants, at least, the acculturation process was so 'overwhelmingly triumphant' that the greater risk consisted in

alienation from family ties and in role reversals of the generations that could subvert parent–child relationships.

Nonetheless, in reviewing the actual evidence for the assimilation sequence in American life, Gordon reached very different conclusions than those that are habitually ascribed to him. He coined the term 'ethclass' to refer to the stratified segment of social space created by the intersection of ethnicity and social class, which he saw as "fast becoming the essential form of the subsociety in America" (p. 51), and proposed a series of hypotheses about contextual variations in cultural behavior, social participation, and group identity. He found that "The most salient fact ... is the maintenance of the structurally separate subsocieties of the three major religions and the racial and quasi-racial groups, and even vestiges of the nationality groupings, along with a massive trend toward acculturation of all groups – particularly their native-born – to American culture patterns." In short, "the sense of ethnic belonging has survived ... American society has come to be composed of a number of 'pots' ... The entire picture may be called a 'multiple melting pot'" (24–25, 67, 130–131). Anticipating what 'segmented assimilation' would assert in the 1990s, he concluded that "Structural pluralism is the major key to the understanding of the ethnic makeup of American society, while cultural pluralism is the minor one" (p. 159).

Gordon was aware of the ways in which the real and the rhetorical, the ideal and the ideological, get wrapped up in the idea of assimilation. 'Cultural pluralism' as an ideology did not match empirical realities, and the theory of the 'Melting Pot' exhibited "a considerable degree of sociological naïveté" (p. 129). And while 'Anglo-conformity' was the most prevalent ideology of assimilation in American history, he also noted that "Structural assimilation turned out to be the rock on which the ship of Anglo-conformity foundered. And if structural assimilation, to a large degree, did not take place, then in similar measure amalgamation and identificational assimilation could not" (p. 114).

Historians have seen the apogee of the concept of assimilation in the 1950s and early 1960s as reflecting the need generated by World War II for national unity, and the postwar tendency to see American history as a narrative of consensus rather than conflict; and the political and social upheavals of the 1960s (nationally and internationally) as shattering the 'consensus school' and the rationale for studying assimilation, bringing back instead a focus on the ethnic group and ethnic resilience, and more inclusive conceptions of American society. As the notion of an Anglo-American core was delegitimized amid the conflicts and ethnic reassertions of the 1960s, assimilation lost its allure (Kazal, 1995). But by the 1990s, once more well into a new era of mass immigration, a systematic reevaluation of the concept of assimilation emerged, with applications in contemporary scholarship seeking to contrast differences and similarities between the old and the new immigration.

### Incorporation Processes: Acculturation, Integration, Identification

Combining the various emphases currently given to the term, 'assimilation' involves a series of interrelated but analytically

distinct cultural (acculturation), structural (integration), and psychological (identification) dimensions. Gordon referred to them as "the three crucial variables of group identity, social participation, and cultural behavior as they pertain to the subsociety of the ethclass" (1964: p. 51). These processes do not unfold in a social vacuum; contextual and group factors shape each of these dimensions either by promoting or precluding assimilative outcomes (Yinger, 1981, 1994; Massey and Sánchez, 2010). In the end, there can be no 'assimilation' without acceptance and inclusion by the dominant society.

*Acculturation*, which comes closest to the common sense notion of 'melting,' involves complex processes of cultural diffusion and changes producing greater linguistic and cultural similarity between two or more groups. Its homogenizing influences are generally more extensive among members of smaller and weaker groups, and particularly (voluntary) immigrant groups – and more rapidly achieved with respect to what Gordon called 'extrinsic culture traits.' Nonetheless, acculturation is never exclusively one-sided; dominant groups too are culturally influenced by their contacts with other ethnocultural groups in the society (Alba and Nee, 2003). In the American experience, language shifts have been overwhelmingly one-sided, with the switch to monolingual English typically being accomplished by the third generation. Acculturation proceeds more rapidly among children than adults, and linguistic and other acculturative gaps commonly develop in immigrant households between parents and children; Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have identified three such acculturative patterns in parent-child relationships, labeled *dissonant*, *consonant*, and *selective acculturation*.

At the individual level, a key distinction is between *subtractive* (or *substitutive*) *acculturation* and *additive acculturation*. The first is essentially a zero-sum game that involves giving up some elements of a cultural repertoire (such as language and memory itself), while replacing them from another; the second does not involve losing so much as gaining to form and sustain a more complex repertoire (bilingualism and biculturalism). Available research has yet to examine systematically the multiplicity of conditions and contexts yielding subtractive versus additive acculturative outcomes, although in the United States at least it has proved exceedingly difficult to sustain fluent bilingualism beyond the second generation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

The degree of acculturation, as noted earlier, is by itself not a sufficient condition for 'assimilation' (the two terms are not synonymous but are often used equivalently; see Gans, 1997). *Structural integration* was the crux of the matter for Gordon, although what he had in mind was the entrance of the minority group into "the social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society at the primary group level" (not 'parity' with the majority group on such indices as income or education, or 'regression to the mean' – notions of standardization implicit in uses of 'assimilation' as an intransitive verb). Given the many different institutions involved – and the fact that integration into the economy, the polity, and the community at the secondary group level is ignored by that formulation – a conceptual distinction can be made between *primary* and *secondary* dimensions. The latter refers to a wide range of integrative processes within secondary groups, including socioeconomic and spatial (residential) integration, and the acquisition of

legal citizenship as a full-fledged member of the polity. The former – extensive interaction within personal networks and primary relationships, including intermarriage – is unlikely to take place under conditions of status inequality. While all of these dimensions (acculturation, integration, intermarriage) are interdependent to varying degrees, the linkages between them are historically contingent and will vary depending on a number of factors, notably social class, racial framing, and the context of reception within which different groups are incorporated.

Conventional accounts of shifts in ethnic *identification* among the descendants of European immigrants, conceived as part of a linear assimilative process, have pointed to the 'thinning' of their ethnic self-identities in the United States. For their descendants, at least, one outcome of widespread acculturation, social mobility, and intermarriage with the native population was that identity became an optional form of 'symbolic' ethnicity (Gans, 1979; Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990). As the boundaries of those identities become blurred and less salient, less relevant to everyday social life, the sense of belonging and connection to an ancestral past faded – into what Richard Alba called "the twilight of ethnicity." This mode of ethnic identity formation, however, was not a simple linear function of socioeconomic status and the degree of acculturation – i.e., of linguistic and other cultural similarities with the dominant group – but hinged also on the context of reception and the degree of discrimination and racialization experienced by the subordinate group.

Identity shifts, like acculturative changes, tend to be from lower to higher status groups. But where social mobility is blocked or hindered by prejudice and discrimination, members of lower status groups may react by reaffirming their shared identity. This process of forging a *reactive ethnicity* in the face of perceived threats, persecution, discrimination, and exclusion is not uncommon (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). On the contrary, it is another mode of ethnic identity formation, accounting for the 'thickening' rather than the dilution of ethnicity. At the extreme, as reflected in the African-American experience, the result can be the sense of 'double consciousness' of which W.E.B. DuBois wrote eloquently.

Compared to language loyalty and language shift, generational shifts in ethnic self-identification are far more conflictual and complex. Paradoxically, despite the rapid acculturation of European immigrants in the United States, as reflected in the abandonment of the parental language and other ethnic patterns of behavior, the second generation remained *more* conscious of their ethnic identity than were their immigrant parents (Nahirny and Fishman, 1965). The parents' ethnic identity was so much taken for granted that they were scarcely explicitly aware of it, but the marginality of their children made them acutely self-conscious and sensitive to their ethnicity, especially when passing through adolescence. Moreover, as parents and children acculturated at different rates, a generational gap grew so that by the time the children reached adolescence 'the immigrant family had become transformed into two linguistic subgroups segregated along generational lines.' Finally, by the third generation 'the grandsons became literally outsiders to their ancestral heritage,' and their ethnic past an object of symbolic curiosity.

### Contemporary Realities: Prospects and Paradoxes

By the late-twentieth century, a new era of mass immigration, now overwhelmingly non-European in composition, had again raised familiar questions about the 'assimilability' of the newcomers and their children, and concerns that many of them might become consigned to vast multiethnic formations on the other side of new color lines. Gans (1992a) questioned the American myth of nearly automatic immigrant success and delineated six theoretical 'scenarios' for the incorporation of the new second generation as they were beginning to enter the workforce, hinging on economic and other conditions. Three were positive scenarios, positing upward mobility driven by educational attainment, ethnic succession, or niche improvement. Three posited negative futures, projecting the reverse of the previous three (educational failure, the stalling of ethnic succession in the legal economy, niche shrinkage) – a 'second-generation decline' potentially exacerbated by a combination of economic downturns or nonlabor-intensive economic growth, the second generation's refusal or inability to accept the jobs their parents held, and competition from successive new waves of immigrants. Rather than experiencing upward mobility, the second generation (or segments of it, especially the children of undocumented immigrants) would join the ranks of urban poor.

The new realities also raised questions about the applicability of explanatory models developed in connection with the experience of European ethnics, despite the fact that contemporary immigrants were being incorporated in a post-Civil Rights context – if also officially categorized by new and pervasive pan-ethnic labels – characterized more by ethnic revivals and identity politics than forced Americanization campaigns. While assimilation (as indexed by acculturation, socioeconomic mobility, residential integration, naturalized citizenship) may still represent a 'master trend' for many of today's immigrants, as Alba and Nee (2003) have argued, it is subject to too many contingencies and affected by too many variables to render the notion of a relatively uniform and straightforward path convincing (aside from the swift switch to English among immigrants' children, which cuts across all classes and nationalities).

Instead, as Portes and Zhou (1993) framed it a year after Gans' six scenarios, the present second generation of children of immigrants can be seen as undergoing a process of 'segmented assimilation' where outcomes vary across immigrant minorities, and where rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible alternative. Why this is so hinges on a number of factors: internal characteristics, including the immigrants' level of human capital and the structure and cohesiveness of their families, interact in complex but patterned ways with external contexts of reception – government policies and programs, the economy in areas of settlement, employer preferences in local labor markets, the extent of racial discrimination and nativist hostility, the strength of existing ethnic communities – to form the conditions within which immigrants and their children adapt to different sectors of American society.

'Segmented assimilation' processes – i.e., adaptations that take place within varying opportunity structures and are shaped through differential associations, reference groups,

experiences, and attachments, especially in primary social relationships stratified by race, religion, region, and class – are not new in the American experience (Rumbaut, 1997). Caste restrictions based on race (extending to all aspects of social life, including citizenship), the 'triple melting pot' of religion-bounded intermarriages, the structural pluralism of 'ethnics', the persistence of ethnic groups as political interest groups, are all indicative of such adaptations. Alba and Nee (2003), thinking about the divergent outcomes that will likely obtain in the first decades of the twenty-first century, concede the point and put it well:

The contemporary immigration scene displays complex, contradictory patterns, from rapid assimilation apparent among some professionals and their children to the new way of sojourning apparent in some transnational circuits, and to the potential among other immigrant groups for incorporation as racialized minorities ... Clearly, assimilation will not apply to all immigrant minorities to the same extent ... many in the second generation are likely to experience upward mobility into the American socioeconomic mainstream ... [others] may experience lateral or, at best, short-distance mobility ... Children of low-wage labor migration are likelier to experience downward mobility into the urban minority underclass than children of human capital migration from the same ethnic group ... There is no reason to believe that assimilation is inevitable or that it will be the master trend for all these diverse groups (pp. 50, 273–275).

### Immigration and American Pluralism

Despite the grand narratives of modernization, which undergird the concept of assimilation, neither race nor religion nor ethnicity has vanished in American life. Protestants (never a homogeneous category, composed of dozens of disparate denominations and of fundamentalist, evangelical, and apostolic varieties) are actually a 'vanishing majority,' having fallen below 50% for the first time in 2005 – a decline that is sharper still among younger people, in more recent years, and among the first and second generations. The U.S. Supreme Court is now made up of six Catholics and three Jews – not a Protestant among them. But religious pluralism remains alive and well. Catholics have remained a fourth of the population for decades now, a secular decline over time having been more than compensated by new influxes of immigrant Catholics from Latin America, the Philippines, and Vietnam. And there has been an increase in non-Christian religions, notably Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims; aside from the long-present Jewish population, all other non-Christian religions had increased to about 5.5% of the population by 2000. The United States remains today a profoundly religious country – not least because the American state allowed immigrant groups to develop their own social and cultural institutions, including parishes, schools, hospitals, temples, and synagogues – a *laissez faire* stance now ironically attributed to the American ability to 'assimilate' them (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014).

The fate of immigrant languages other than English is another matter: linguistic 'Anglicization' and other forms of acculturation do proceed rapidly, especially among immigrant children and the second generation, and that may be truer now

than ever before, despite the unprecedented diversity of class, culture, and color in the present era of mass immigration. The United States has been aptly described as a 'graveyard' for languages because of its historical ability to extinguish the mother tongues of immigrants within two or three generations (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014). As documented consistently and compellingly by a variety of sources, including census and survey data, not even Spanish appears to challenge this dubious reputation.

But alongside undeniable upward social mobility from the first to the second generation for most groups, especially the children of the poorest and least educated – though the gains appear to peak in the second generation and decline or plateau thereafter (Telles and Ortiz, 2008) – there is compelling evidence of widening 'ethclass' and legal inequalities, of new conflicts and political mobilizations around ethnic and racial issues, and of downward mobility and marginalization for vulnerable segments of these populations. An undocumented status has become a castelike master status blocking access to the opportunity structure and paths to social mobility for millions of immigrants. A fraught concept like 'assimilation,' weighted by the normative baggage of its past and by its insistent if inclusive expectation of progress and homogenized national cohesion, seems ill-suited to grasp these complex dynamics and to focus critical attention on enduring structural inequalities and persistent ethnic and pan-ethnic formations in a 'permanently unfinished' society.

*See also:* Generations, Sociology of; Inequality, Social; Integration, Social; Minorities; Minorities; Prejudice in Society; Sociological Perspectives; Race Identity; Racial Relations; Social Identity in Sociology.

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