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SOME PROBLEMS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE ETHNIC ECONOMY[1]

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If we consider Marx an economist, then Weber and Simmel were the first major sociologists to devote considerable attention to the causes and consequences of the economic behavior of religious and ethnic groups. As is known, one of Weber's major interests was the part played by different religious groups in the development of rational capitalism in the West (Weber 1958). Weber concluded that adherents of Calvinism and other Protestant sects were possessed of a worldly asceticism which was highly consonant with the requirements of modern capitalism. Elsewhere, Weber pondered a related issue, to wit, why "no modern and distinctively industrial bourgeoisie of any significance emerged among the Jews" (1964, p. 249). Weber's answer adduced, among other things, that a serious study of Jewish law was more compatible with such pursuits as moneylending and that the institution of the dowry "favored the establishing of the Jewish groom at marriage as a small merchant" (1964, p. 255). Another reason why, in Weber's view, industrial production was not a favored activity among

Jews was the dual ethic: "what is prohibited in relation to one's brothers is permitted in relation to strangers" (1964, p. 250). As a result of the dual ethic, the Jew, unlike the Calvinist, found it "difficult... to demonstrate his ethical merit by means of characteristically modern business behavior" (1964, p. 252).

As for Simmel, he saw the European Jews' tendency to engage in trade as being inextricably related to their status as "strangers" in society. As he put it (1964, p. 403):

Throughout the history of economics the stranger everywhere appears as the trader, or the trader as stranger... Trade can always absorb more people than primary production; it is, therefore, the sphere indicated for the stranger, who intrudes as a supernumerary, so to speak, into a group in which the economic positions are actually occupied -- the classical example is the history of European Jews.

The impact of Weber's and, especially, Simmel's pioneering ideas regarding ethnicity and economic behavior is discernible early in U.S. sociology. The notion of the "trader as a stranger" is found in the work of Park (1950a, 1950b), Wirth (1928), and Stonequist (1937). Becker's book (1956) devoted an entire chapter to "middleman trading peoples," in which he discusses, among other things, the concept of the "dual ethic." For reasons not entirely clear, interest in the sociology of ethnic economic behavior remained dormant for a while, but reappeared in the 1950's (Cahnman 1957; Rinder 1958; Stryker 1959; Blalock 1967). This interest persists today under the leadership of Bonacich, Light, and Portes, among others. As a result, a considerable body of writings has emerged.

Although this literature has added to our knowledge, it suffers from some problems. There are issues which have not been explored sufficiently, discrepancies regarding important concepts, contradictions, and dubious assumptions. In brief, the field of study seems to be in need of careful reexamination. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate such a reassessment.

DESCRIBING THE ETHNIC ECONOMY

Two contrasting views exist in the literature regarding the substantialness and economic status of ethnic firms. The first sees ethnic businesses essentially as minute and financially shaky operations. For example, Werbner (1984, p. 166) states:

A poorly stocked corner shop or a windswept market stall are often the most visible signs of immigrant entrepreneurship. Frequently undercapitalized and unprofitable, such ventures may be doomed from the start to fail, or to continue at the same low level of profitability.

Aldrich, Jones, and McEvoy (1984, p. 191), speaking of Asian shopkeepers in Britain, assert:

While self-employment may provide some minority members with an alternative to wage employment in the White dominated labor market, the opportunities so presented do not usually represent a qualitative improvement. Rather, they represent a sideways shift from the lumpenproletariat to the lumpenbourgeoisie.

Similar characterizations may be found in, among others, Bonacich (1987) and Wong (1977).

The second view sees ethnic enterprises as comprising small as well as moderately large, financially secure firms. Italian-owned businesses in Britain include prosperous, trendy restaurants as well as more modest operations (Palmer 1984). The Christian and Jewish ethnic economies in Ottoman Syria contained firms involved in large-scale moneylending and foreign trade (Zenner 1987). According to Portes and Bach (1980), the Cuban ethnic economy of Miami (or, as they prefer to call it, the "ethnic enclave"), is characterized by "an extensive division of labor and... a highly differentiated entrepreneurial class" (1980, p. 205). Enclave firms in Miami in such lines as construction, banking, and real estate conduct business in the millions of dollars (Portes 1987).

The problem with these two views is that they have not been reconciled in the literature. In point of fact, the first perspective predominates over the second. One may counter that this is only right, for, after all, a considerable number of ethnic firms are small, and many suffer from financial ricketiness. While not disagreeing with this statement, it is important to note that ethnic owners operate large and moderate sized firms, as well as small ones. Further, these small and medium establishments do not seem to constitute two separate bodies but interrelate with each other (Boissevain and Grotenberg 1986; Portes 1987). In point of fact, it would be accurate to see them as members of the same business community. Consequently, the predominant perspective presents a skewed view of the ethnic economy.

Additionally, since small size and economic precariousness are seen as invariant characteristics, there has been little, if any, comparative work on the determinants of size and economic robustness among ethnic enterprises. As a result, ethnic enterprise theory is deficient in this regard.

CONTOURS OF THE ETHNIC ECONOMY

There is agreement in the literature that ethnic business operators rely on each other for help and that they depend on a coethnic labor force. Regarding owners, the view is that they assist each other through loans, business tips, and commercial relations. This helps explain, the argument goes, the resilience of ethnic enterprise.

This view, however, requires qualification, because sometimes relations between owners are tenuous and rivalrous, as many of them compete with each other (Werbner 1984). Besting a coethnic in a business deal is not unknown, and neither is cheating him (Boissevain and Grotenberg 1986, p. 10).

Notwithstanding this qualification, there is ample evidence that ethnic owners rely on each other, particularly on family members (Aldrich, Jones, and McEvoy 1984; Boissevain and Grotenberg 1986; Lovell-Troy 1980). One of Light's (1972) contributions was to profile mechanisms of mutual reliance within the ethnic community. He showed, for instance, that in some ethnic groups members share access to capital through rotating credit associations.

Although Light (1972) did not discuss the possibility that circles of interdependence among owners may extend outside the group, Light and Rosenstein (1987) present data showing that residence in the Miami area raises the probability of self-employment not just for Cubans, but also for other Hispanics. This suggests at least two possibilities: 1) Hispanics interested in going into business for themselves tend to move to the Miami area, or 2) non-Cuban local Hispanics may find it easier to set up a business in Miami than elsewhere. In either case, it is plausible to speculate that the higher chances of self-employment of Hispanics in Miami may be influenced by business networks which span across different

nationalities.

As for the ethnic composition of the employees in ethnic businesses, the traditional view is, as stated previously, owners rely on coethnics. Paternalism governs owner-employee relations. This secures a pliant and reliable work force which is not susceptible to unions. In return for their loyalty, workers have a job and perhaps will receive help in the future to set up their own businesses (Bonacich and Modell 1980).

Although utilization of in-group labor seems to be the predominant pattern, important exceptions exist. A study of the Cuban ethnic economy of Puerto Rico (Cobas 1987b) found that a sizable proportion of Puerto Ricans were employed in Cuban firms. For reasons discussed in that study, not many working-class Cuban exiles live in Puerto Rico, a fact which may explain the utilization of local labor by Cuban firms.

Ladbury (1984, p. 108), discussing minority-owned businesses in Britain, states that "Cypriot-owned factories... employ between 10 and 30 people the majority -- though by no means all -- of whom are Greek or Turkish Cypriot." One of the four firms discussed in detail in Werbner's study of Pakistanis in the Manchester garment trade had, in addition to Pakistani employees, Indian, Bengali, English, West Indian, African and Spanish personnel (1984, p. 180).

Waldinger asserts in his book on the garment industry of New York that although he "expected that informal networks linking the immigrant firm to the broader ethnic community would play an important role in securing the labor force" his interviews "also pointed to the limits of [in-group] solidarity" (1986, p. 160). He observes that "both Chinese and Dominican firms were highly encapsulated within their respective communities, though the Dominican firms showed a greater tendency to recruit from the broader Hispanic immigrant labor force" (1986, p. 184). A Dominican owner with a mixed Hispanic labor force stated the following (Waldinger 1986, p. 161):

I'm of the opinion that whoever does the work best, that's it. I don't have to see where he's from; rather that he does his work. If a compatriot doesn't do his work well and someone who isn't a compatriot doesn't do it badly, I'm going to have to go with the one who produces.

But even though ethnic economies recruit across different nationalities, there is some evidence suggesting that such recruitment does not result in an equal access to all jobs. Cobas (1987b) found that employees in Cuban-owned businesses in Puerto Rico tended to occupy positions such as manager and accountant. This indicates that these Cuban owners may rely on coethnics to fill positions of trust in their businesses. If this is the case, it is possible that in some ethnic economies there are at least two tiers within the labor force. If two such tiers exist, then it is plausible to assume that ethnic owners favor coethnic employees. Two implications follow. First, when an ethnic labor force is mixed, the paternalism of owners may be extended only to coethnic workers. Secondly, if this is true, it is likely to affect the loyalty of out-group workers and their imperviousness to unionization (cf. Ladbury 1984, pp. 115-116).

In conclusion, there is reason to consider seriously that prevailing views in the literature require modification. First, the conception that owners engage in mutual help needs to be tempered with the qualification that competition and friction among them occurs. Second, it is important to explore the possibility that entrepreneurial networks may extend across ethnic groups. Third, there is evidence indicating that, not infrequently, ethnic businesses have an ethnically heterogeneous labor force. Fourth, it is plausible to speculate in situations with such heterogeneity that owners favor coethnic personnel. Taken together, these possibilities suggest that

relations among owners and between owners and employees are more complex than previously thought and that the borders of the ethnic economy are not as impermeable as they are usually conceived.

CAUSES OF BUSINESS SPECIALIZATION AMONG ETHNICS

As discussed at the outset, Weber, Simmel and other early social scientists were intrigued by the economic behavior of such minorities as the Jewish community. One of the questions they addressed was why members of these minorities are found disproportionately in economic activities involving self-employment. Following the lead of these pioneers, later social scientists have developed a myriad of propositions. Our purpose here is not to provide an overview, since comprehensive reviews are available (Bonacich and Modell 1980; Fratoe 1984; Pontes 1987; Waldinger 1986), but to deal with problems found in some of the major hypotheses. Some of the problems to be discussed pertain to specific hypotheses; others refer to difficulties found in many, if not all, of the propositions in the literature. We will discuss specific hypotheses first.

The first proposition to be discussed may be dubbed "the stranger" hypothesis. Propounded by Simmel (1964), Toennies (1971), Park (1950b), Foster (1974), Geertz (1963), Sway (1981), Wong (1977) and others, it argues that kinship and/or ethnic ties between customers and business people interfere with business. When business people are strangers to their clients, as is the case with minority entrepreneurs, they can conduct business in an objective manner, extend credit only to those who are able to pay, and so on. Consequently, one reason why traders are disproportionately found among minorities is because minority entrepreneurs benefit from their stranger status.

A second hypothesis, which emphasizes the notion of the "protected market," was originally advanced to explain why U.S. Blacks were underrepresented in trade when compared with the foreign born. This is how Light (1972, p. 11) puts it:

White businessmen have traded with Blacks because they sold what the Blacks wanted to buy; hence, Blacks who wanted to become retail tradesmen had to compete with White retailers. Foreign-born immigrants, however, did not face this competition. Unlike American Blacks, foreign-born peoples had special consumer demands which outside tradesmen were unable to satisfy... The special demands of ethnic consumers (for example, lasagna noodles, kosher pickles, won ton soup) created protected markets for ethnic tradesmen who knew about the things their countrymen wanted.

If we juxtapose both hypotheses, it is clear that they incorporate two contradictory ideas. According to the protected market proposition, minority traders benefit from trading with coethnics; according to the stranger hypothesis, trading with coethnics creates serious difficulties. Whereas the protected market hypothesis sees ethnic businesses as growing as a result of trade with the in-group, the stranger hypothesis predicts that such trade would impede growth.

It is possible to argue that the protected market and stranger hypotheses pertain to two different stages of minority business development because "the protected market is vital only in the initial stages of business development" (Aldrich, Jones, and McEvoy 1984, p. 193). Consequently, minority firms first do business with coethnics, then they shift to an out-group clientele. However, this sequential view does not do away with the essential problem: how can ethnic businesses which serve

coethnics survive conditions which the stranger hypothesis regards as fatal?

A third proposition emphasizes attributes of the ethnic group as causal antecedents of ethnic entrepreneurship. It asserts that certain minority groups are overrepresented in business because they are endowed with qualities and cultural elements which are highly consonant with the growth of enterprise, such as strong communal ties, a background in trade, mutual aid mechanisms, and a tradition of parsimony and hard work (Weber 1962; Frazier 1957; Light 1972). A fourth hypothesis sees ethnic enterprise as a response to disadvantages such as discrimination, lack of familiarity with the host society, and poor education (Light 1979). Faced with such disadvantages, minority members turn to such activities as shopkeeping, which "has the advantage that... it is open to those with little skill or specialized training" (Reeves and Ward 1984, p. 131). Notice the contradiction: while the third proposition sees ethnic enterprise as deriving from special endowments of minority groups, the fourth hypothesis sees ethnic business activities as a refuge which requires minimal skill.

But the fact that it stands in contradiction to the "disadvantages" hypothesis is not the only problem with the "special endowments" hypothesis. Another difficulty is, as Aldrich and Zimmer (1985, p. 7) put it, "that the groups alleged to possess a propensity to entrepreneurship display their predisposition only under limited, country specific, and historically specific conditions." moreover, if there is such a thing as special endowments that predispose certain ethnic groups to entrepreneurship, then it is difficult to explain why "prior to immigration, persons originating from the alleged entrepreneurial cultures are mostly indistinguishable from others around them, but in their new surroundings they take on entrepreneurial characteristics" (Aldrich and Zimmer 1985, p. 7).

Second, it is not clear that the traits alleged to favor enterprise are displayed only by entrepreneurial minorities. Aldrich, Jones, and McEvoy (1984) and Zimmer and Aldrich (1987) show that majority business owners use many of the same coping mechanisms as minority group entrepreneurs.

Third, there are some ethnic groups which do very well in business because they lack endowments which are thought to favor enterprise. Boissevain and Grotenberg (1986) studied Chinese, Creole, and Hindustani Surinamese immigrants in Amsterdam. Chinese and Hindustani immigrants brought with them such attributes as "access to loyal labor, a patriarchal family orientation and a network of kinsmen who hold strong values regarding rights and duties towards each other" (1986, p. 17). On the other hand, the Creoles did not have these attributes. Because their "native" resources were so limited, Creoles had to learn about and adapt to the local life and entrepreneurial culture. And because of this adaptation, there are "many very successful Creole enterprises in Amsterdam" (Boissevain and Grotenberg 1986, p. 18).

Fourth, some of the characteristics adduced by this hypothesis -- hard work, strong community ties, etc. -- are just as likely to result from the exigencies of owning a business as they are to precede ownership. Since there are few, if any, studies which test this hypothesis using panel data, the type required to substantiate the causal sequence assumed by the hypothesis, its validity is open to question.

Having discussed problems pertaining to specific hypotheses, it is necessary to take up difficulties which accompany most, if not all, of the propositions in the literature. First, these hypotheses are meant to explain entrepreneurship within a given minority group, but they do not take into account that minority groups are not class homogeneous, that all classes do not pursue self-employment with equal vigor, and that, among

those who seek self-employment, members of different classes take different routes (Nowikowski 1984; Portes 1987). For example, the members of Nowikowski's sample of Asian immigrants in Britain were composed of a Western-educated and professional class, a business bourgeoisie, an urban lower middle class, and a rural middle strata. Professionals, as a rule, did not seek self-employment. Members of the business bourgeoisie were active in the textile import and export trade from the time of arrival. "These business activities," as Nowikowski (1984, p. 160) puts it, "were typically an extension of business interests originating in South Asia." Lastly, members of the urban lower middle class and rural middle strata turned to self-employment frequently, but usually after a spell in poorly paid unskilled positions.

Before moving to the next section, a last commentary is necessary. The literature seems to assume that the same antecedents lead to all kinds of self-employment. Hypotheses make no distinction between such different pursuits as retail trade, independent professions, construction, and labor subcontracting. However, there is evidence that there is more than one path to different forms of self-employment. In his study of Cuban exiles in Puerto Rico, Cobas (1986) found, for instance, that the probability of becoming a merchant was associated with such variables as business background, low education and perception of hostility from the host society. moreover, while a business background also affected the likelihood of becoming an independent professional, neither low education nor perception of hostility had such an effect.

MIDDLEMAN MINORITIES

The "middleman minority" approach, one of the earliest perspectives in the study of the ethnic economy, originated with the work of Becker (1956), Cahnman (1957), Rinder (1958) and Stryker (1958). Later it was elaborated on by Blalock (1967) and subsequently further developed by Bonacich (1973).

These minority groups, as indicated by their appellation, are said to occupy middleman positions. First, unlike most other minorities, these groups are not at the bottom of the socioeconomic heap, but in the middle (Blalock 1967; Zenner 1980). Secondly, minority members concentrate in such occupations as "trade and commerce... [and] other 'middleman lines' such as agent, labor contractor, rent collector, money lender, and broker" (Bonacich 1973, p. 583; see also Cahnman 1957).

The occupational specialization of these groups is seen as being caused by a combination of factors; among them are discrimination and the status gap. Rinder (1958, p. 253) defines the status gap as the "discontinuity... which occurs when superior and subordinate portions of a society are not bridged by continuous, intermediate degrees of status." Status discontinuities make interaction between the dominant groups and the lower classes difficult, especially in the area of trade. The reason for this is that "since trade relations require that buyer and seller play complementary and interdependent roles, members of the upper strata must consider trade beneath their dignity" (Rinder 1958, p. 254). Being excluded by virtue of discrimination from other positions, middleman minorities move in and fill the status gap.[2]

In addition to structural elements such as the status gap, Bonacich (1973) placed a heavy emphasis on a sojourning orientation as an antecedent to middleman economic specialization. Most middleman minority group members, she argues, do not emigrate to settle permanently in the host society, but to amass a fortune and eventually take it home. Consequently, they concentrate on middleman lines which are liquid and can be disposed of easily when the time comes to return home. Even when returning home becomes

impossible or impractical, these individuals retain a strong attachment to their place of origin, which produces a reluctance to set down roots in the host society and a predilection for liquid middleman lines.

Bonacich's synthesis, the best known in the literature, has received criticism on at least two substantive grounds. First, it places too much emphasis on situational factors, glossing over such important variables as cultural attributes. Secondly, the sojourning hypothesis is problematic, since entrepreneurial groups, such as the Jews of Europe, were active in middleman lines before the advent of the Zionist movement. Additionally, some groups which retain strong ties with the country of origin, such as Puerto Ricans in the United States, are not middleman minorities (Light 1979; Hill 1977). In addition to these substantive objections, recent empirical tests have failed to support convincingly the middleman minority model (see, for example, Aldrich, Jones, and McEvoy 1984; O'Brien and Fugita 1982). There, in short, are difficulties with this perspective.[3]

But before making a final judgment about it or heeding calls to substitute other concepts for middleman minority (O'Brien and Fugita 1982), it is necessary to address several issues. First, substantive difficulties and empirical inconsistency are not unique to the middleman minority perspective, but are shared by other theories of immigrant economic adaptation, such as dual labor markets (Bonacich 1979; Hodson 1983).

Secondly, evaluations of the middleman minority model have often proceeded without considering the possibility that the middleman mode of adaptation is only one of the many strategies which a group can use (Portes and Manning 1986; cf. also Palmer 1984; Werbner 1984). In other words, previous research has often assumed that because a minority group engages in trade it must be considered a middleman minority. However, as Portes and Manning (1986) assert, some groups have adopted the ethnic enclave rather than the middleman minority strategy. This is how they distinguish the two:

immigrant enclaves are not exclusively commercial. Unlike middleman minorities, whose economic role is to mediate commercial and financial transactions between elites and masses, enclave firms include in addition a sizable productive sector... [Additionally] the enclave is concentrated and spatially identifiable. By the very nature of their activities, middleman minorities must often be dispersed among the mass of the population.

Therefore, an entrepreneurial minority may follow either an enclave or a middleman minority mode of adaptation.

There is, however, another possibility, namely, that both modes of economic adaptation may coexist. There is evidence suggesting that they do. For example, the Cuban ethnic economy of Miami includes many large businesses (Portes 1987) whose operations fit the enclave mode. It also comprises many small businesses dispersed throughout the city, some near or in Black areas, whose characteristics approximate the middleman model. Moreover, although Jews have been discussed as the prototype of the middleman minority, Portes and Manning (1986) describe the economic adaptation of Jews in Manhattan as taking the form of an ethnic enclave.[4]

Therefore, the failure of the middleman model to fit the data well in some cases may not reflect an inadequacy on the part of the model, but rather the fact that the group in question may be using either another mode or the middleman and enclave modes simultaneously. If the former is true, then the middleman model is simply not appropriate. If the latter is the case, then the model will be appropriate only for part of the group. In sum, while not denying that there are difficulties associated with the middleman minority model, it is important to consider that this and other

models in the literature may not have received entirely adequate tests for the reasons just adduced.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As discussed previously, the literature in the field of the sociology of the ethnic economy suffers from several problems. First, it presents skewed views on the import and viability of ethnic firms as well as on the degree of harmony within the ethnic economy. Second, it contains contradictory hypotheses on the origins of ethnic enterprise. Third, these hypotheses seem to be applied to all classes in the ethnic group and do not distinguish different forms of entrepreneurship. Fourth, although many of the causal hypotheses on ethnic entrepreneurship require tests based on panel data, few, if any, such tests exist. Fifth, views regarding the issue of the boundaries of the ethnic economy and the question of ethnic heterogeneity in ethnic firms' personnel and its consequences are incomplete. Finally, the problem of the varying modes of the ethnic economy has not been studied sufficiently.

In light of these circumstances, it seems that it would be beneficial to reassess research on the ethnic economy. Two things are of particular importance in such a reassessment. The first is to establish with greater precision what it is that past research has uncovered and what this implies for extant theoretical approaches. The second is to reconcile contradictions among theories and to better calibrate the scope of their predictions.

1. Parts of this paper draw on portions of Cobas (1987a).

2. Although status gaps are more likely to exist in pre-capitalist societies, they are also found in modern industrial societies. For instance, in the United States, racism creates a status gap in the Black ghetto, where the "shopkeeper and pawnbroker are likely to be minority members, commonly of Jewish background but also of Chinese, Iraqi, and other origins" (Bonacich and Modell 1980, p. 26).

3. For critical discussions of the middleman minority perspective, see Hill (1977), Light (1979), Portes and Bach (1985) and Waldinger (1986).

4. I am grateful to the students in my "minority Traders" seminar for this observation.

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