Caribbean Immigrants and the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity: Limits of the Assimilation Perspective

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Introduction

Contemporary Caribbean immigrants defy scholarly and popular conceptions of who Blacks are in America. The observations and generalizations sociologists made in the past about an undifferentiated Black population; the dichotomy between immigrants and racial minorities; and the widely held belief that ethnicity is only meaningful to Whites -- all no longer make sense. Even more, Caribbean immigrants present a formidable and necessary challenge to the existing models of ethnic adaptation in race relations research -- the most dominant of which is the assimilation perspective (Hirschman 1983). This essay aims to show that the assimilation perspective has, not only failed to consider immigrant and ethnic adaptation among people of color, but has also constrained sociological investigations of ethnicity among Blacks historically which has resulted in a seriously flawed interpretive framework. With the recent increase in the foreign-born Black population, sociologists can no longer understand ethnicity exclusively in the framework of White immigrants; nor can we continue to think of race as the most essential characteristic of Blacks in the United States. "Black" does not necessarily equal "African-American" anymore.

Assimilation and Cultural Deficiency -- The Building Blocks of a Perspective

Best expressed in the work of Robert Park, the assimilation model was originally characterized as a natural evolutionary process. "Assimilation is the process ... in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups and by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life (Park and Burgess 1924:735)." In the most general sense, the model held that as immigrants and ethnics became acculturated -- took on values, customs, language, manner, and dress of the majority White population -- they would achieve entry into the major institutions and mainstream society.

In *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon (1964) distinguished three ideologies of assimilation: the melting pot, Anglo-conformity, and cultural pluralism. Yet, despite all the modifications, racial minorities have been incorporated by analogy only. The idea of a "melting pot" neglects the power imbalance and inequality among racial and ethnic groups altogether; and the legacy of cultural deficiency among Blacks questions the premise of the cultural pluralism perspective, where all groups retain their distinctiveness characterized by their religious practices, family structure, lifestyle, and cultural values (Glazer and Moynihan 1963). The assumption that Blacks had lost all vestiges of their original African cultures and, unlike European immigrants, had no cultural tradition -- and thus no ethnic status -- dominated the race relations perspective (McKee 1993). Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) note, "Whites are seen as variegated in terms of group identities, but all Blacks look alike." So, even the cultural pluralism perspective proves to be inadequate in that it fails to recognize the basis and variability of Black culture.

In addition, as Marilyn Halter (1993) argues in *Between Race and Ethnicity*, one of the biggest failures of all American assimilation theory is that race, if discussed at all, is treated either as a derivative of ethnicity or the terms are used interchangeably, as if they were the same (see Gordon 1964; Handlin 1973; Higham 1975; Kallen 1924; Smith 1991). Classic assimilationist theory when applied to Blacks, as it has been to rural Southern Blacks following the Great Migration, depicts them as if they were no different from European peasants arriving in northern cities (Banfield 1974; Glazer 1971; Handlin 1962; Lieberson 1980; Kristol 1966; Reid 1939;

Wirth 1928). The experience of slavery and its legacy of institutionalized inequality is stressed as being a special, but not insurmountable, obstacle to the Black population in the adaptation process.

Underlying the application of this paradigm to racially defined groups are debates about the definition of an ethnic group. The very origins of the terms ethnicity and ethnic group lay outside the experiences of racial minorities. W. Lloyd Warner (1945), who was perhaps the first to use the term ethnicity, distinguished between ethnic groups, which he saw as characterized by cultural differences, and racial groups, characterized substantially by physical differences. Since then sociologists have been unable to resolve the dilemma of acknowledging the effect of racial discrimination on the experience of Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in this country without essentializing race. Those who use the broad definition of ethnic group (that is, one that includes racial groups) argue that the experiences of people defined as nonwhite are essentially similar to the experiences of White groups (Glazer 1971; Nagel 1994; Sollors 1989; Sowell 1981). On the other hand, analysts such as Halter (1993), who prefer the narrower definition of ethnic group, maintain that what often occurs is that the European or White ethnics become the norm. Furthermore, in *Understanding Everyday Racism*, Philomena Essed (1991) argues that the substitution of ethnicity for race as a basis of categorization is accompanied by an increasing unwillingness among the dominant group to accept responsibility for the problems of racism (see also, McKee 1993).[1] This tendency to conflate race and ethnicity and the resultant lack of conceptual clarity creates a special obstacle to understanding the experiences of groups that are simultaneously racial and ethnic groups.

Arguably the dilemma of fitting Black ethnics into the sociology of race and ethnicity stems from one primary theoretical limitation of the assimilation perspective -- the failure to recognize ethnic differences among Blacks. Not only is the paradigm based exclusively on the framework of European (White) ethnicity, but Blacks are seen within this construct as simply another ethnic group (Halter 1993; Omi and Winant 1994; Zephir 1996). Like society itself, the sociological discourse on ethnicity reveals a biracial rather than a multicultural mode of analysis; and with rare exceptions sociological theories of ethnicity are not very interested in ethnicity *among* Blacks.

Ethnic Identity among Black Immigrants

Despite the lack of an interpretive framework, scholars have begun to piece together a perspective on Black ethnicity that in many ways operates very differently for Caribbean immigrants than the assimilation perspective would suggest. Recent scholarship suggests that for Caribbean immigrants, race and ethnicity have very different meanings, acculturation is not the desired or ultimate end, and social mobility and the preservation of ethnicity are not at all antithetical (Bonnet 1990; Foner 1987; Fouron 1987; Kasinitz 1992; Waters 1994).

The most significant and consistent interpretation of the adaptation of Caribbean immigrants concerns the fundamental difference from the experience of White immigrants because of the effect of race. Without minimizing the extent of rabid anti-immigrant bias in this country, it is now clear that racial minorities have encountered a different kind rather than a different degree of prejudice than White ethnic groups have faced. This fact is very well captured in David Roediger's (1994) essay on White ethnics in America. He notes that as European immigrants made the transition from the Irish in America or the Poles in America to Irish-Americans and Polish-Americans, they also became White Americans. In fact, they chose and even struggled to be recognized as White (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991; Waters 1990).

However, Caribbean immigrants perceive a status loss when they assimilate or become Black American. Coming from societies where they constitute the racial majority, where Blacks are in positions of leadership and authority, and where the social meaning of race is influenced by color

and class distinctions, the ascription of a minority status is perceived as a step down (Bryce-Laporte 1972; Kasinitz 1992; Laguerre 1984; Vickerman 1994; Woldemikael 1989). "If White immigrants," as Philip Kasinitz (1992) remarks, "tend to gain status by becoming American -- by assimilating into a higher status group -- Black immigrants may actually lose status if they lose their cultural distinctiveness."

In *American Odyssey*, Michel Laguerre (1984) points out that for Haitian immigrants, the racial barrier adds a dimension to the everyday problems other immigrants usually face. Suddenly, skin color becomes a problem, and one that cannot be overcome. Whether light-skinned or dark skinned, intellectual or illiterate, former military officer or civilian, city dweller or country folk -- the Haitian immigrant is first, foremost, and remains Black. Similarly, Nancy Foner (1985, 1987) describes how Jamaicans in New York cling to their "Jamaicanness" with the realization that assimilation with Black Americans would mean being stigmatized as part of a group which has a low status in American society.

Flore Zephir (1996) reinforces previous findings that ethnic distinctiveness is the credo of Caribbean immigrants in *Haitian Immigrants in Black America* (See Bryce-Laporte 1972; Buchanan 1979, 1983, 1987; Fontaine 1976; Fouron 1987; Glick-Schiller 1975, 1977; Laguerre 1984; Woldemikael 1985a, 1985b, 1989). Her study of Haitians in New York City reveals that the decision to maintain themselves as a distinct ethnic group is a conscious one. She describes how Caribbean immigrants tend to use their ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness as a situational response, an accommodation tactic to increase their chances of making it in their new environment, or as a means of resistance to the subordinate status imposed on them by the American system.

On second-generation Caribbean Blacks, Mary Waters (1994) has begun to explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, and class in the development of racial and ethnic identity. In short, Waters found the relationship between social mobility and ethnicity for Black immigrants is exactly opposite what it is for White immigrants. For Black immigrants, the more socially mobile they are, the more they cling to their ethnic identity as a hedge against their racial identity.

Conclusion

The number of empirical and theoretical questions about Black immigrants alone requires sociologists to expand the discourse on race and ethnicity. How are we to understand ethnic differences among Blacks? Is the incorporation of Black immigrants different from white immigrants because of racial discrimination? How do these differences fit the existing models of incorporation in immigration research? Over time, do they become just another hyphenated American ethnic group or just Black Americans? What effect does race have on the ethnic options of America's contemporary immigrants and their children?

How sociologists specializing in the area of race and ethnicity deal with the study of Caribbean immigrants will help us gauge whether or not we have truly abandoned the race relations perspective so many have identified as a failure (Back 1963; Blauner 1972; Fendrich and Sloan 1966; Hughes 1963; Lyman 1972; Omi and Winant 1994; McKee 1993; Van den Berghe 1967). The emergent significance of Caribbean ethnicity challenges sociologists to abandon, once and for all, a deficiency paradigm, a dichotomy between White immigrants and racial minorities, and an assimilation perspective that is inadequate for the interpretation of race and ethnicity in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. If sociology's neglect of ethnicity among Blacks is only the unintentional effect of the application of a paradigm based on White ethnic history to a racially defined group, the growing population of non-European immigrants provides ample subjects for empirical research.

Given the recent interest in the construction of Whiteness, to ignore the construction and diversity of Blackness is at the very least, neglectful. Coco Fusco reminds her readers that "racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American and so on; they are also White."[2] The aim of this essay is to remind us that ethnic identities are not only Polish, Irish, and Italian; they are also Haitian, Jamaican, and Guyanese.

[1] This of course is not the case for all scholars who use the terms interchangeably. For example, Joane Nagel's use of the term 'ethnic group' rather 'race' or 'racial group' in her discussion on constructing ethnicity to describe African-Americans is not intended to discount the unique importance of color or race as a basis for discrimination and disadvantage in U. S. society (and elsewhere). She states that her arguments about ethnicity are meant to apply to all racial and ethnic groups, whether distinguished by color, language, religion, or national ancestry. As an example of ethnic boundaries among Blacks, however, she cites the work of Keith and Herring on the skintone distinctions that exist among African-Americans, reifying distinctions of skin color among Blacks where other groups are distinguished by cultural differences. See Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture" Social Problems, 41 (February 1994), p. 153; Verna M. Keith and Cedric Herring, "Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community," American Journal of Sociology 97: 760-778.

[2] Quoted in David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (New York: Verso, 1991).

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