The American Ethnic Experience As It Stands in the Nineties

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The US is, we know, highly diversed ethnically, having drawn its populace from many countries historically and continuing to do so today. But we also know that, for all its heterogeneity, America is a *nation*, not just a collection of separate ethnic groups. It's hardly surprising, given our need to create and maintain a nation on the lines *e pluribus unum* describes, that we have periodically worried about our capacity to maintain and indeed enhance "one nation" status.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton described this continuing challenge in his brilliant opening chapter of *What I Saw in America* (1922). Chesterton wrote of "the great American experiment; the experiment of a democracy of diverse races which has been compared to a melting pot." This experiment naturally puts great pressure on the vessel: "...[T]hat metaphor implies that the pot itself is of a certain shape and a certain substance; a pretty solid substance. The melting pot must not melt." How well is the pot holding now as the century ends?

After a period of low immigration that followed a vast tightening of American immigration law in the 1920s, legal immigration was again expanded in the 1960s. In recent years, too, substantial numbers of immigrants have entered the country illegally. As a result, the foreign-born population of the US has climbed—from 5.4 percent in 1960 to 9.3 percent in 1996 (p. 51). And, far more than their predecessors, recent immigrants have come from Latin America and from Asia.

Worries about the impact of the new waves of immigration on national unity and values should be mitigated by the historic fact that such concerns have proved ill-founded in previous periods—when rates of immigration exceeded those of the present day, in terms of proportions of the base population. They should also be greatly diminished if not dismissed by recent survey findings that show newcomers to America committed to its values and confident of their chance to succeed in their adopted home (pp. 52-54).

In the second segment of the data essay that follows, we look at differences in social outlook and political behavior among a broad array of US ethnic groups, not just recent immigrants. In its General Social Surveys, the National Opinion Research Center locates respondents ethnically by asking them, "What countries or part of the world did your ancestors come from?," and if more than one country or area is mentioned asking, "Which of these countries do you feel closer to?" As the data on pages 55 and 56 indicate, differences among Americans of various European origins that loomed fairly large historically, are now virtually non-existent. The closing of historic divides in party preference and voting among groups with European origins is striking—though not unexpected given the fact that most of the immigrations thus represented are now old ones.

The final segment of this data essay on ethnicity examines comparatively the views and experiences of blacks and whites. A huge new literature on this subject has appeared in recent years, with the authors offering sharply contrasting interpretations of whether the data show a lessening or heightening of this largest-of-all ethnic divide. Andrew Hacker is one who has forcefully argued the "two societies" thesis (*Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal,* New York: Scribner, 1992); while Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom have recently marshaled support for the argument that progress is being made in black-white relations and the status of African-Americans in particular—more than is often acknowledged (*America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

The data we have assembled here (pp. 57-64) seem to us clearly to support a position far closer to the Thernstroms' than to Hacker's. Both African-Americans and whites see their inter-group relations in the 1990s in terms much more multi-faceted than "two societies" envisions them. It's hardly surprising that African-Americans are much more inclined than others—given the historic backdrop of slavery and then Jim Crow—to emphasize the problems racism has bequeathed. But African-Americans now see comity as well as conflict, opportunity as well as discrimination, and progress as well as problems that stubbornly resist answers. For all the history of separation and name-calling, stereotyping and oversimplification, Americans now see race relations in hues far more subtle than black and white.

Probably in large part because they have felt the burden of racial discrimination as others have not, African-Americans are much more inclined to insist that the nation, through national government programs, now assume greater responsibility for finding remedies (p. 61). But blacks and whites differ little in goals and ideals. A vast array of survey data make evident that on most core social and political values, and personal ones as well, one finds not black vs. white but a far-reaching national consensus (p. 62).

What's perhaps most striking in these data is the increase over the past couple of decades in the proportions of both groups reporting interactions with members of the other group as friends and neighbors. For example, ABC News and the *Washington Post* have asked on five occasions since 1981, most recently in 1997, whether you know (for whites) any African-American whom you consider a fairly close personal friend, and the counterpart question (for African Americans) on white friends. We now report far more cross-group friendships than we did even in the 1980s (p. 64).

In the past the melting pot has been seriously tested. But as we see it in the data that follow, it's holding pretty well now in the 1990s.