

Chapter 1 from

Ethnic America: A History

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“The American Mosaic”

The peopling of America is one of the great dramas in all of human history. Over the years, a massive stream of humanity—45 million people—crossed every ocean and continent to reach the United States. They came speaking every language and representing every nationality, race, and religion. Today, there are more people of Irish ancestry in the United States than in Ireland, more Jews than in Israel, more blacks than in most African countries. There are more people of Polish ancestry in Detroit than in most of the leading cities in Poland, and more than twice as many people of Italian ancestry in New York as in Venice.

The sheer magnitude of American ethnic communities makes them autonomous cultures with lives of their own—neither copies of some “mainstream” model nor mere overseas branches of some other country’s culture. Chow mein, the St. Patrick’s Day parade, and the Afro hairdo all originated on *American* soil. Far from taking direction from overseas, American ethnic communities have supplied leadership to their countries of origin. The first president of Ireland, Eamon de Valera, was born in Brooklyn. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was born in Milwaukee. Liberia was for more than a century ruled by the descendants of freed American Negro slaves.

The massive ethnic communities that make up the mosaic of American society cannot be adequately described as “minorities.” There is no “majority.” The largest single identifiable ethnic strain are people of British ancestry—who make up just 15 percent of the American population. They barely outnumber German Americans (13 percent) or blacks (11 percent). Millions of Americans cannot identify themselves at all ethnically, due to intermixtures over the generations.¹

The setting in which the history of all these peoples unfolded is no less impressive than the numbers and varieties of the peoples themselves. The United States is one of the largest cultural-linguistic units in the history of the world. From San Francisco to Boston is the same distance as from Madrid to Moscow. Yet here there is one language, one set of laws, and one economy in an area that, in Europe, is fragmented into a multitude of nations, languages, and competing military and political blocs. The size and cohesion of the American society are all the more remarkable because of the diverse origins of the people who make it up. As a unified nation, the United States is older than Germany or Italy. As for size, Texas is larger than France, Colorado is larger than Great Britain, and Italy is only two-thirds the size of California. The United States as a whole is larger than the Roman Empire at its greatest expansion.

The mixture of unity and diversity runs through American history as through American society today. No ethnic group has been wholly unique, and yet no two are completely alike. Each group has its own geographic distribution pattern, reflecting conditions when they arrived on American soil and the evolution of the industries and regions to which they became attached. Even the ages of American ethnic groups vary widely. Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans have median ages of less than twenty years, while the average Irish American or Italian

American is more than thirty years old, and Jewish Americans are over forty. These age differences reflect not only current fertility patterns—some groups are composed disproportionately of children— but also historic *changes* in fertility patterns that have caused the successive generations to be of drastically altered size in some groups.

Incomes, occupations, and unemployment rates differ substantially among American ethnic groups, as do rates of crime, fertility, and business ownership. The *explanation* of those differences is complex and in many ways surprising. None of the easy explanations fits all the facts. Color has obviously played a major role in determining the fate of many Americans, and yet a black ethnic group like the West Indians earns more than a predominantly white ethnic group like the Puerto Ricans, and the Japanese earn more than whites in general. The initial wealth of a group and its time of arrival are obviously important, as many wealthy “old families” show, but the Jews arrived late and penniless in the nineteenth century and are now more affluent than any other ethnic group.

THE ECONOMIC PICTURE

The incomes, occupations, and unemployment rates of American ethnic groups are too different from one another to be described by any generalization. Moreover, it is as misleading in the economic area as in other areas to think of them as “minorities” who fall below some “majority,” or national average, in socioeconomic terms. A number of ethnic groups exceed the national average in socioeconomic status.

Jewish	172
Japanese	132
Polish	115
Chinese	112
Italian	112
German	107
Anglo-Saxon	107
Irish	103
TOTAL U.S.	100
Filipino	99
West Indian	94
Mexican	76
Puerto Rican	63
Black	62
Indian	60

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census and National Jewish Population Survey.

Many factors are responsible for these economic differences among the various groups. Age is a major factor that is often overlooked. Ethnic groups that differ in average age—by ten or twenty years in some cases—have vastly different percentages of their population in the older age brackets, where people in professional and other high-income occupations are concentrated. For example, about 20 percent of American Indians are age forty-five or older, while *twice* that percentage of Polish Americans are that old.² Higher income occupations typically require either

long periods of education or long years of experience, or both, so it is not surprising that older ethnic groups earn more than younger ethnic groups. What is misleading is when these gross differences are regarded as showing either the extent of employer discrimination or of ethnic “ability.” Comparisons of the earnings of thirty-year-old males show a narrower spread among ethnic groups, and when the comparison is between thirty-year-old males with the same education, the differences become even smaller.

In a country as vast as the United States, with very different economic conditions in different regions, the average income of an ethnic group depends to some extent on how the group is distributed among the regions. Differences between members of the same ethnic group located in different places are often greater than the difference between the national average income and the average income of the group as a whole. There are regional differences, not only in income, but also in such things as fertility, IQ, and the rate of return on educational investment.³

Discrimination has obviously influenced the incomes of American ethnic groups. All have been discriminated against to one degree or another. Yet some of the most successful—such as the Orientals—have experienced worse discrimination than most, and the extraordinary success of the Jews has been achieved in the face of centuries of anti-Semitism. The *moral* offensiveness of discrimination has attracted much attention, but whether its *cause-and-effect* role is equally important is another question. There are also difficulties in distinguishing current employer discrimination from past discrimination in schooling, whose effects may still be present years later. These complex questions will be considered in the chapters that follow.

Education is also an obvious influence on income. For every ethnic group, finishing college means an income above the national average. In recent years, even long-standing black-white income differences have been eliminated among college-educated young people with similar family characteristics.⁴ The amount of education varies greatly from one ethnic group to another, and variations in educational quality add to these differences. Those groups with the largest quantity of education—Jews and Orientals—also tend to be educated in higher quality institutions and in the more demanding and higher paid fields, such as the natural sciences, medicine, and law.⁵

The diversity of American ethnic groups in economic terms is equally apparent in such social characteristics as fertility, longevity, crime, IQs, and alcoholism.

As in the general society, fertility tends to be greatest where people are poorest: “The rich get richer, and the poor have children.” In general, those ethnic groups with the lowest incomes—blacks, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans—have the highest fertility rates, while Jews and Orientals have too few children to reproduce themselves. Another striking pattern is that the more successful members of low-income groups have even *fewer* children than equally successful members of the general population. That is, high-income blacks, Indians, and Hispanics have unusually low fertility rates. For example, Mexican American women who have completed high school have *fewer* children than any other women with the same education, even though Mexican Americans as a group have the highest fertility rate of any American ethnic group.⁶ The causes of this phenomenon are not nearly so clear as the effects of it.

When those individuals who have struggled upward from poverty to affluence die off without fully reproducing themselves, it means that much of their struggle has to be repeated from scratch in the next generation because they leave few descendants to start off with the advantages made possible by their success. In other words, a part of the “human capital” accumulated by low-income ethnic groups perishes with each generation, making the group’s upward mobility more difficult for lack of the money, experience, personal contacts, and other advantages that

their more successful members could pass on to their offspring.

High fertility directly lowers the standard of living of a group by spreading a given income more thinly among family members. Mexican Americans average lower incomes per capita than blacks, even though blacks earn less, because Mexican-American families are larger.⁷ This contributes to the Mexican Americans' poorer housing and lesser education than blacks—and, of course, much less than the general U.S. population. High fertility is also correlated with lower scores on mental tests by the children, who must receive smaller shares of parental time. Half of all black males who failed the army mental tests came from families of six or more children.⁸ Whatever the cultural bias of the mental test, such bias would apply equally to blacks from small families, so the *difference* in failure rates is significant.

Fertility rates in general have changed drastically over the years, and the relative positions of various ethnic groups have been reshuffled as well. As of 1910, Jewish women in the thirty-five-to forty-four-year age bracket had the same number of children (5.3) as Mexican Americans, and more than blacks (4.2), the Irish (3.3), or the national average (3.4). By 1969, however, Jewish fertility in the same age bracket had been more than cut in half (2.4), while Mexican-American fertility had been reduced only moderately (4.4), as had that of blacks (3.6) and the Irish (3.1).⁹ This means a V-shaped distribution of ages among the Jews, with the older generations spread out at the top, followed by progressively fewer younger age individuals, leading to a high average age for the group as a whole.

Rates of unemployment, crime, and fertility are all strongly influenced by age. Unemployment varies so much by age that, despite a generally higher unemployment rate among blacks than among whites, whites *under twenty* have consistently had higher unemployment rates than blacks in the prime twenty-five- to forty-four-year-old bracket. Similarly, most violent crime is committed by males under twenty-five, so that groups with a high proportion of their members in the crime-prone age brackets tend to have high crime rates for this reason, even aside from other factors that may be at work. The magnitude of this effect may be suggested by the fact that, although black crime rates are several times those of whites, the black and white crime rates become very similar when people of the same age and socioeconomic condition are compared.¹⁰

Like fertility rates, IQ scores differ substantially among ethnic groups at a given time, and have changed substantially over time—reshuffling the relative standings of the groups. As of about World War I, Jews scored sufficiently low on mental tests to cause a leading “expert” of that era to claim that the test score results “disprove the popular belief that the Jew is highly intelligent.”¹¹ At that time, IQ scores for many of the other more recently arrived groups—Italians, Greeks, Poles, Portuguese, and Slovaks—were virtually identical to those found today among blacks, Hispanics, and other disadvantaged groups.¹² However, over the succeeding decades, as most of these immigrant groups became more acculturated and advanced socioeconomically, their IQ scores have risen by substantial amounts. Jewish IQs were already above the national average by the 1920s, and recent studies of Italian and Polish IQs show them to have reached or passed the national average in the post-World War II era. Polish IQs, which averaged eighty-five in the earlier studies—the same as that of blacks today—had risen to 109 by the 1970s.¹³ This twenty-four-point increase in two generations is greater than the current black-white difference (fifteen points).

Social attitudes about race and ethnicity have changed considerably over time, especially in the post-World War II era. Jews, who had been excluded from many top university faculties, came ultimately to be overrepresented on such faculties. Professional sports that had once

excluded blacks came to be dominated by black athletes. Anti-Oriental laws, which had flourished for decades in California, were repealed in popular referendums. Intermarriage rates among people of Irish, German, and Polish ancestry exceeded 50 percent of all their marriages, with Italian intermarriage rates falling just below 50 percent and Japanese Americans not far behind. Attitude surveys and election results show similar patterns of growing mutual acceptance.¹⁴

The road toward pluralism and cosmopolitanism has been long and rocky. The intergroup animosities of the nineteenth century—among European ethnic groups or between nativists and immigrants of European or Oriental ancestry—frequently erupted in violent confrontations in which the loss of life exceeded anything seen in mid-twentieth-century versions of “race riots.”¹⁵ An anti-immigrant political party called the Know-Nothings achieved a brief but spectacular success in the 1850s, electing six governors and dominating several state legislatures.¹⁶ Later revivals of the same intolerant spirit culminated in national legislation all but cutting off immigration in the 1920s. The tragic history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and lynchings against blacks is all too familiar. Yet what is peculiar about the United States is not that these intergroup animosities have existed here—as they have existed for thousands of years elsewhere—but that their intensity has lessened and in some respects disappeared.

Ethnic groups themselves have changed in ways that made their acceptance easier. The high rates of crime, disease, dependence on charity, and lack of personal hygiene that characterized many nineteenth-century immigrant groups passed with their acculturation to American norms and with the improvement of cities themselves, as sewer systems replaced backyard outhouses and eventually indoor plumbing brought running water into the tenements by the end of the nineteenth century (although bathtubs remained a rare luxury even then). Before that, the smells and diseases of the slums were overpowering realities. Moderate heat waves were literally fatal in tenements that were far more overcrowded and unventilated than the slums of today. People who could not speak English, or who could not read or write in any language, were far more common then. Religious animosities were so fierce as to retard the development of public education,¹⁷ as well as to provide the spark for riots and the fuel for long-smoldering political rivalries. Protestant-Catholic clashes led to fifty deaths in one day in 1871.¹⁸ In earlier times, there were similar antagonisms and violence against Mormons, Quakers, and others.¹⁹

American pluralism was not an ideal with which people started but an accommodation to which they were eventually driven by the destructive toll of mutual intolerance in a country too large and diverse for effective dominance by any one segment of the population. The rich economic opportunities of the country also provided alternative outlets for energies, made fighting over the division of existing material things less important than the expansion of output for all, and rewarded cooperative efforts so well as to make it profitable to overlook many differences.

TIME AND PLACE

The many ethnic groups that make up the American people did not arrive at the same time or locate in the same places. Each group typically had its own era during which its immigration to America was concentrated. Irish immigration to the United States peaked about 1850, while Jewish immigration peaked half a century later, and Mexican-American immigration peaked half a century after that. Geographic distribution has been equally diverse. Scandinavians settled in the upper Midwest, Orientals along the West Coast, Cuban refugees in Florida, Mexican

Americans in the Southwest, and the Scotch-Irish along the Appalachian region from western Pennsylvania down through the Carolinas. Those groups that arrived virtually penniless from Europe—the Irish, the Italians, and the Jews—settled right in the northeast ports where they arrived. Blacks were concentrated in the South.

Since each of these regions has its own characteristic economic activities, the fate of each of these groups became intertwined with the fate of wheat farming or steel production, railroading, cotton manufacturing, etc. Because economic conditions in the country as a whole were different in different eras, each group faced a different set of opportunities and constraints upon arrival. The subsequent economic history of each group reflected the influence of time and place, as well as the cultural heritage that it brought to America.

Present-day differences are still heavily influenced by location. The average family income of blacks in New York State is more than double that of blacks in Mississippi. Mexican Americans in the Detroit metropolitan area earn more than twice as much as Mexican Americans in the metropolitan areas of Laredo or Brownsville in Texas. American Indians in Chicago, Detroit, or New York City make more than double the income of Indians on reservations. These differences within the same ethnic group are greater than the differences between any ethnic group and the larger society.²⁰ Location matters.

The geographic distribution of ethnic groups affects not only their incomes but also their lifestyles in general. American Indians in the rural Midwest average about two children more per family than American Indians in the urban Northeast. Blacks outside the South have consistently had smaller families and higher IQs than blacks living in the South. Even within a given city, a given ethnic group has widely varying patterns of income, crime, broken homes, etc., by neighborhood—whether the ethnic group is Jewish, Italian, Mexican, etc., in origin.

There are many historic reasons for differences in the geographic distribution patterns of American ethnic groups, and for their arrival at one period of history rather than another.

The change from wind-driven ships to steam-powered ships caused a drastic change in the origins of immigrants to America. In the era of wind-driven ships, European immigrants came almost exclusively from northern and western Europe. With the advent of steam-powered ships, suddenly immigration was overwhelmingly from southern and eastern Europe—people with greater cultural and religious differences from the U.S. population, at a time when religious differences were of major social and political importance.

In the era of wind-driven ships, an ocean voyage on a passenger vessel was beyond the financial means of most immigrants. They could reach America only in the hold of a cargo vessel returning from its deliveries in Europe. This meant that mass immigration was possible only from areas with large-scale trade with the United States—northern and western Europe, but not eastern or southern Europe. American shipments to Europe were usually bulky agricultural cargoes and their imports were much smaller sized European manufactured goods, so that there was excess space on the return voyage. This space was where the immigrants were packed in, in makeshift quarters without adequate ventilation, toilet facilities, or enough food or water, in either quantity or quality. The voyage was long—and unpredictable. Depending upon the winds, it might take from one to three months. The longer the voyage took, the weaker the people became from inadequate food and water and the more susceptible they became to diseases that could spread quickly in the crowded hold of a cargo ship.

The routes traveled by cargo ships depended upon the pattern of trade. This meant that the immigrants did not select their destinations but landed wherever the ship was going. For example, the Irish came to America in vessels that carried lumber from the northeastern United

States, so that is where they landed when the ships returned. Many Germans took cargo vessels that carried cotton to Le Havre and returned to New Orleans—where empty space on Mississippi river-boats returning to northern cargo shipping points carried the Germans through the upper Mississippi Valley to settle in such places as Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. The American beer industry was created by the Germans in the latter two cities, with Budweiser originating in St. Louis and numerous other brands in Milwaukee.

The economic conditions that happened to exist in the region of settlement were particularly important for those groups too poor to relocate. For example, the Irish who landed in Boston found a city with very little industry or other opportunities for working-class people. Most American working-class groups avoided Boston for that reason, but this was where many of the Irish found themselves in the middle of the nineteenth century, and they suffered the economic consequences for years to come. The very large numbers of the Irish who arrived in a few northeastern cities (notably New York and Boston) within a very few years (the 1840s and 1850s), and most of them crowded into a single occupation (unskilled labor), created special problems of absorption into the economy and society. As canal and railroad building proceeded in the Northeast, poverty-stricken Irishmen took on the hard and dangerous jobs involved. Many settled in the cities and towns along the routes of the canals and railroads. Their present-day geographic distribution continues to reflect these early settlement patterns.

The change from wind-driven ships to steam ships drastically altered the pattern of American immigration. The time of the voyage shrank from a variable thirty to ninety days to a dependable ten days, and it now became economically feasible for working-class people to travel on ships specializing in passengers rather than cargo. No longer were immigration patterns tied to trade patterns. These developments changed both the size of the immigration and its origins. The number of immigrants rose from 5 million in the pre-Civil War era to 10 million in the next thirty years, and to 15 million in the next fifteen years. The change in countries of origin was equally dramatic: 87 percent of the immigrants were from northern and western Europe in 1882, but twenty-five years later, 81 percent were from southern and eastern Europe.²¹ Slavic, Jewish, and Mediterranean peoples became important elements of the American population for the first time.

Blacks were of course brought to the United States involuntarily, and their destinations were chosen by others, but it was not a random choice. Blacks were concentrated in the South, whose climate and soil were suited to the kinds of crops that could be produced under the restrictive conditions of slavery. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, slavery in the United States became overwhelmingly cotton-producing slavery, and the geographic distribution of the black population shifted even more so toward the South, concentrating in the cotton-growing lands of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and northern Louisiana. Even after the end of slavery, the concentration of blacks in a region that was to remain poorer than the rest of the country was an enduring economic handicap. Today, that half of the black population which lives outside the South earns about 50 percent higher income than the half still located in the South. Obviously, the income of the black population as a whole is lower because of its geographic distribution, aside from all other considerations.

Some immigrants to the United States simply settled in those parts of the country closest to their places of origin—the Orientals in Hawaii and on the West Coast, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Cubans in Florida. The concentrations of Puerto Ricans and West Indians in and around New York City reflect the accessibility of air and shipping routes in the twentieth century.

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- ¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, P-20, No. 249 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 1.
- ² Thomas Sowell, "Ethnicity in a Changing America," *Daedalus*, Winter 1978, p. 221.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227; Eric Hanushek, "Ethnic Income Variations: Magnitudes and Explanations," in *Essays and Data on American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Thomas Sowell, pp. 139-166.
- ⁴ Richard B. Freeman, *Black Elite* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), Chapter 4.
- ⁵ Sowell, "Ethnicity in a Changing America," p. 232.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 217, 218; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, P-20, No. 226 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 20.
- ⁷ Leo Grebler, et al., *The Mexican American People* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), pp. 181, 185.
- ⁸ Arthur R. Jensen, "How Much Can We Boost I.Q. and Scholastic Achievement?" *Harvard Educational Review*, Winter 1969, p. 95.
- ⁹ Sowell, "Ethnicity in a Changing America," p. 217.
- ¹⁰ Ernest van den Haag, *Punishing Criminals* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975), p. 100.
- ¹¹ Carl Brigham, *A Study of American Intelligence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1923), p. 190.
- ¹² Thomas Sowell, "Race and I.Q. Reconsidered," in *Essays and Data on American Ethnic Groups*, p. 207.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- ¹⁴ Sowell, "Ethnicity in a Changing America," pp. 218-220.
- ¹⁵ J. C. Furnas, *The Americans* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), pp. 522, 527, 700; Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 150, 151; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1963), p. 240; and Arthur Lewis, *Lament for the Molly Maguires* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Jones, *American Immigrations*, pp. 157-163.
- ¹⁷ Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1974), Chapters 4 and 5.
- ¹⁸ Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, p. 240.
- ¹⁹ Furnas, *The Americans*, pp. 65, 522; Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans* (New York: Random House, 1958), Vol. I, p. 37.
- ²⁰ See Sowell, "Ethnicity in a Changing America," p. 226.
- ²¹ Jones, *American Immigration*, p. 179.