

The Invention of Ethnicity and Dynamics of Multiculturalism in the U.S. Two Case Studies

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Abstract

There are huge variations in the makeup of the United States. The nation has grown from diverse cultural backgrounds. As immigrants discontinued to be “foreigners” and yet did not become “One Hundred Percent Americans”. From immigrants they are described to have become ethnic Americans of one kind or another. Ethnic group limits must be repeatedly renegotiated, while ethnic traditions must be repeatedly redepicted.

Invention of ethnicity is a social phenomenon, which has demonstrated unforeseen flexibility in the contemporary world. It implies a dynamic process of ethnicization among diverse sidestream ethnicities and results in changes in several directions. This is a dialectical change due to the mainly political as well as socio-economic condition in the new homeland as well as their original one.

The Italian Americans have displayed great fluency, creativity and efficacy in defining their position in the American reality. This chosen way of refashioning of Italian-American ethnicity will probably continue as individuals plunge into their cultural tank and choose prospects that suit their needs at specific moments in time.

There have been three waves of Georgian immigration in the U.S. The first wave immigrants were political refugees, representing anti-Bolshevik forces of 1920s. They came to the United States via Europe. The number of the second wave Georgian immigrants after the end of World War II didn't grow significantly, probably because of the second “Red Scare” towards Bolsheviks that the United States went through. The most substantial number of Georgian immigrants arrived in the U.S. through the third wave after the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to the hard socio-economic problems arising in Georgia in 1990s.

Keywords: self-identity, ethnicization, Americanness, mainstream, ethnoculture, symbolism

Introduction

The United States is a massive land of great diversity. There are huge variations in the ethnic makeup of the nation. The United States has grown from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result of different national origins and ethnic variations, America is counted among the world's largest heterogeneous societies.

The dominant interpretation of the immigration process for centuries both in American historiography and nationalism ideology had been rapid assimilation. Anglo-conformity and the Melting Pot, molded the assumptions of several generations of historians and social scientists. (Gordon, 1964, pp. 476-583) The idea of the metaphor of the melting pot, once used to refer to American culture, was that all of the different cultures and races who came to America all melted to become one. American nationality in the contiguous post-Revolutionary period was defined mostly in ideological terms. An American was someone who abstained from foreign loyalties and consciously subscribed to the basic princi-

ples of republican self-government, while nationality rested on presumptions of a general uniformity of values as well as conditions. The Revolutionary generation faced two crucial problems of self-identity: the need to differentiate themselves from Britain and the need to draw together states whose populations had very different cultural traditions and national origins. This attitude was revealed through self-conscious campaigns to promote patriotic symbols and loyalties in the first decades of national existence.

There is probably another reason why melting pot theory was embraced in the initial periods of the national existence: the cultural assumptions Americans make about other Americans.

It worked more effectively particularly during the period of national formation in order to consolidate all states, and for this purpose the two American assumptions were most acceptable for the majority – WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant).

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Assumption One: Homogeneity or the Melting Pot Myth

Homogeneity is the belief that Americans are like most other Americans, that most Americans are white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants, and that all of the other people form a small minority of the population. Homogeneity is a belief in the “melting pot” myth; a belief that even though the United States is the land of immigrants, those immigrants have integrated into the rest of America and have become like everyone. It is the belief that everyone is and wants to be like the majority.

Assumption Two: Similarity or the Myth that You are Just Like Me

Similarity is the belief that other people are like you. It is like assumption that other people have the same life goals and career aspirations as you, that they enjoy the same activities as you, and that they behave in similar ways to you. As with the assumptions of homogeneity, the assumption of similarity is a natural tendency. (Adler, 1986, pp. 481-499), although to my mind the distinction between homogeneity and similarity seems quite small.

The irony about Assumption A is that America is a nation of many distinct cultures. Domestic multiculturalism is the reality; the melting pot is a myth. Cultural pluralism has guided American behavior even if the melting pot had been American public intention. In place of homogeneity, the more appropriate assumption could be heterogeneity. ‘Heterogeneity’ is the assumption that Americans are not all the same, that society is composed of many different groups.

The criticism of the Assumption B lies in the fact, that with the assumption of similarity we expect people from other cultures to act as we do and we are surprised and often angry or disappointed – when they do not act as we expect. Most people feel much more comfortable with people who are more similar to them than with people who are more different from them. (Triandis, 1980)

The second problem with assuming similarity between ourselves and people from other cultures is that it fundamentally denies individuality. Both people and cultures have aspects that are similar to each other and different from one another. By seeing only the ways in which others are similar, one negates their individual characteristics; by focusing strictly on universal human qualities, one denies the other person’s unique qualities. It is challenging to recognize both similarities and differences at the same time.

Historical studies in the United States after 1970s have put melting pot theory under question. Scholars have intensively emphasized the determined opposition with which im-

migrants often opposed Americanization and their zealous efforts at language and cultural preservation. Meanwhile according to scholarly studies the immigrants’ “traditional cultures did not remain unchanged. (Geertz, 1973)

Moreover, immigration historians have become increasingly interested in the process of cultural and social change, as immigrants discontinued to be “foreigners” and yet did not become “One Hundred Per Cent Americans”. From immigrants they are described to have become ethnic Americans of one kind or another.

Ethnicity has therefore become the major concept in the analysis of the process of immigrant accommodation. From the 1960s on the increase of ethnic movement in the United States and all over the world an unprecedented animation of ethnicity as a source of group identity and solidarity has been observed. Although there are many definitions of ethnicity, some have triggered discussions of immigrant adaptation. According to anthropologists Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973) and Harold Isaacs, (Isaacs, 1975) ethnicity concentrates on a perceived primordial character, stemming from the “basic group identity” of human beings. In this consideration, persons have an essential need for “belonging” which is fulfilled by groups based on shared ancestry and culture.

Others, like sociologist Herbert Gans, (Gans, 1979) have discounted the traces of immigrant cultures as “symbolic ethnicity” is condemned to fade away before the irresistible forces of assimilation.

A different conception of ethnicity, initially proposed by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, understates the cultural component and defines ethnic group as interest groups. According to this view, ethnicity serves as a means of mobilizing certain population behind issues relating to its socioeconomic position in the larger society. Given the uneven distribution of power, prestige, and wealth in polyethnic societies, people can be organized more effectively on the basis of ethnicity, than of social class. Leadership and ideologies play important roles in the scenario of “emergent ethnicity”. While “primordial ethnicity” both generates its own dynamic and is an end itself, “interest group ethnicity” is instrumental and situational. (Glazer, 1970)

Werner Sollors considers ethnicity, as a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and increases preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories. It is grounded on real life context and social experience (W. Sollors, 1985, pp. 131-147). I completely agree with mentioned consideration.

Ethnic groups in modern stage are constantly recreating themselves, and ethnicity is perpetually being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host society.

Ethnic group limits, for example must be repeatedly re-

negotiated, while ethnic traditions must be repeatedly redepicted. Historicization of the phenomenon implies the notion of invention of ethnicity to appear, metamorphose, disappear, and reappear.

In our article we'll try to illustrate the flourishing and decline, the phases of prominence and quiescence in the histories of Italian and Georgian ethnic groups in the U.S.

The invention of ethnicity suggests an active participation of the immigrants in defining their group identities and solidarities. In inventing its ethnicity the group determines the terms, status, and consequences of its accommodation to "others". The renegotiation of its "traditions" by the immigrant group presumes a collective cognizance and active decision-making as opposed to passive, insensible individualism of the assimilation model.

According to historic facts, immigrant groups were in no sense homogeneous; they varied according to regional origin, dialect, class, politics, and religion. One of the purposes of invented traditions of the emerging ethnicity was to provide symbols and slogans which could unify the group despite differences. The symbolic umbrella of the ethnic culture had to be broad and flexible to benefit several, often contrary purposes: provide the basis for solidarity among the potential members of the group; encourage the group to defend its cultural values and to promote its demands to power and resources; meanwhile to decrease the hostility of the mainstream ethnoculture by portraying the congruence of the sidestream ethnoculture with American principles and ideals.

On the individual psychology level, the invention of ethnicity implied seeking for reconciliation of the duality of the "foreignness" and "Americanness" which the immigrants and their children underwent in their everyday lives.

The notion of the invention of ethnicity enables us at the same time to understand how immigration changed the larger American society, generating a new pluralistic social order.

Once ethnicity was perceived in American thought as the necessary for the newcomers to negotiate its particular place within the established social order, Anglo Americans had to assimilate these diverse groups into their conception of the history and future of "their" country, and to allot these groups appropriate social and cultural arrangements. Later all Americans – native born and immigrant, were involved in a recurring renegotiation of identities. Many ethnic cultures were embedded into changing definitions of what was American and what is meant to be an American. Without correlating to either the Anglo-conformity or Melting Pot models of assimilation, the relationship of mainstream ethnoculture and sidestream ethnoculture created major changes in both.

To illustrate the dynamics of ethnicization process in the

U.S. we have chosen two case-studies in different contents and periods. The first focuses on Italian Americans, and the second on Georgian Americans.

Italian Americans: Progressing Negotiation of an Ethnic Identity

As immigrants in the United States, Italian workers at the turn of the twentieth century faced competing ideologies to shape their identities and loyalties. The spirit of companionship initially defined their dominant sense of peoplehood through the cult of the saints. Immigrants brought statues of the saints and madonnas to America, and tried to reestablish the acts of piety and veneration that were parts of the traditional festa.

Nonetheless, changes began to slide into observances from the beginning. The pinning of American dollars on the robes of saints, for example was an innovation. But sometimes even non-Italians attended the festa, sometimes to mock. The result was that despite every endeavor, the festa could not be celebrated strictly in the traditional way. So the elements of celebration weakened, and the elements from the new-world were integrated, and it became a manifestation of an emerging Italian-American ethnicity. Many mutual aid societies with a new military-patriotic form of Italian nationalism came into being. These societies supported the invented symbols and slogans of the recently unified kingdom of Italy. Named after members of the royal family or favorite heroes, like Garibaldi, these societies sponsored banquets, balls, and picnics, which celebrated national holidays. A colonial elite of businessmen and professional encouraged by the Catholic clergy promoted this nationalist mode of ethnicity as a means of providing hegemony over the laboring immigrants. (Pozzetta & Vecoli, 1992)

However, this determination of the Italian immigrant identity was intensively opposed by the socialists and anarchists. Expressing oppositional ideologies which were anti-religious, anti-nationalist, and anti-capitalist, they tried to impress class consciousness as members of the international proletariat among Italian workers. The radicals used newspapers, songs, drama, clubs. Instead of celebrating saints' days or national holidays, they marked the fall of the Bastille, the Paris Commune, May Day. Each of these forms of ethnicization was aimed at defining the core character of the immigrants in the sense of collectivity. In succeeding decades other types of peoplehood suggested the immigrants' alternative collective representations. Italian immigrants became more rooted in America. As the immigrant generation began to decrease, it became necessary to create an Italian-American identity. The formation of the Sons of Italy in America in

1905 was one attempt to reconcile with applicable language and symbolism, the duality of being Italian-American. Columbus Day served as the symbolic expression of this dual identity. By recognizing Italians at the very beginnings of American history through their ancestor, the anniversary of the “discovery” of the New World benefitted to legitimization of their claims to Americanness at the same time it allowed them to take pride in their Italianness.

In the 1920s Benito Mussolini’s Fascist regime added to the contention present within Italian America by trying to win over immigrants and their offspring. New festivals, heroes, and slogans emerged, where fascist element dominated definitely. There were Italian-American celebrations, such as Columbus Day; they inserted their own holy days into the calendar, sang fascist battle songs, unfurling banners with Mussolini’s commands. Anti-fascist Italians resisted these initiatives with counter demonstrations, values, and symbols. Composed of mix of Italian-American labor activists, leftist radicals, liberal progressives and educated Italian exiles, anti-fascists found it difficult to agree upon a united front.

Notwithstanding these divisions, their demonstrations attempted to link Italian Americans with the republican legacy of the Italy and its champions of freedom, such as Garibaldi and Mazzini (Ibid, p. 28)

World War II solved the question of Fascism by making preserving of dual loyalties impossible, and the subsequent Cold War undermined the position of radicals in the Italian-American community.

The war crisis and following anti-communist crusade put a high dividend on conformity, loyalty, and patriotism to the United States. To many observers in the 1940s and 1950s it appeared that Italian Americans were comfortably melding into the melting pot as especially the second generation realized increased social mobility, adopted middle-class values, and joined in the rush to mass consumerism.

However, by 1960s, during the turbulent period following the civil rights movement led by initiated by African-Americans, minorities, immigrants, the third and fourth generation Italian-Americans unexpectedly began to declare their distinctiveness as part of a wider ethnic revivification sweeping America. Italian-Americans joined with other ethnicities to renegotiate their ethnicities in the middle of a national political crisis during which dominant societal values and identities were put under question. Once again, the self-conscious crafting of symbols, rituals, and images became highlighted as Italian-Americans attempted to consolidate internally, lay claim to being fully American, and inscribe a more dignified place for themselves in the American history.

As the Italian-American population was divided by generation, class, occupation, education and residence, there

was serious disagreement over the right rhetoric and cultural forms to utilize in expressing Italian-American organizations during sixties and seventies. Upwardly mobile and socially climbing individuals for example, tried to form a more positive image by focusing on the glories of Old Country high culture, trying to connect Italian-Americans with the accomplishments of Dante, Davinci, and other famous Italians. Other Italian-Americans tried to cash in on the prestige of contemporary Italian design and style by consuming Gucci, Pucci, Ferrari, etc.

The new Italian-American ethnic activism also took form of vigorous anti-detraction campaign. The main target of this campaign was the diffusive characterizations of Italian criminality in the mass media. Different Italian-American organizations brought strong public pressure against the U.S. Department of Justice, the ‘New York Times’, and other media to stop references to the Cosa Nostra and Mafia. They also attempted to cease derogatory “Italian Jokes” as well as commercials and media depictions, which represented Italian-Americans as coarse, uneducated boors. After succumbing passively for decades to stereotyping and defamation, Italian-Americans had activated to renegotiate their ethnicity mainstream institutions. Their significant success in doing so was demonstrated through attaining a level of economic and political power which enabled them to bargain from a position of strength. Thus the Italian-Americans have demonstrated great fluency, creativity and efficacy in defining their position in the larger society than ever before.

Political and Economic Causes of the Georgian Emigration to the U.S. and their Ethnic Adaptation

The world migration reasons have always been the same: wars provoking refugees to migrate to neighboring or distant countries, political, such as revolutions, economic crisis leading to social and economic problems.

The 20th century Georgia became conspicuous through waves of emigration to the U.S. Each of them had its own reasons. The make-up of the immigrants was diverse according level of education, social, gender and age aspects. Correspondingly, immigrants of different waves differed in the degree of Americanization and the level of success they reached in a new land. I’ll try to sketch the characteristics of migration waves, particularly the last flow of Georgian emigration to the U.S. The topic of Georgian immigrants is unfamiliar to American scholars as nowadays in the U.S. there are no works exploring Georgian immigration though numerous works are devoted to the broad, theoretical analysis of immigration in general and the exploration of such ethnic

groups, as Jews, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Irish, Italians, Polish, Greek, etc. One reason maybe, that the number of Georgians in the U.S. was quite small throughout XX century; another cause might be that the Georgian immigrants who came from the Russian Empire and later from USSR (after its collapse as well) were mainly regarded as Russian and not Georgians, who were absolutely unknown for most Americans for quite a time. On the other hand, if we take into consideration the Georgian researchers information of recent years (Chantladze-Bakradze, 2006) Georgians were aware of America since its discovery, as according this information among the members of Christopher Columbus Expedition, there were two Georgian brothers.

Attraction of Georgians towards the U.S. in the second half of the 19th century was fixed in the Georgian mass-media of that time.

In 1860s a small number of the first Georgians appeared in the United States. Since 1880s larger groups of Georgians became visible. Mainly these groups were represented by workers from Racha (a region of Western Georgia) who worked on the Seattle railroad construction and horseman from Guria (another region of Western Georgia) who became circus actors. Neither of the groups occupy the high strata of the American society. Their gender composition was largely homogeneous: they were male. The majority of them, who stayed in the U.S., entered intermarriage and their descendants got absolutely assimilated.

After the occupation of Georgia by Russians and its sovietization incorporation into the USSR in 1921, political refugees made up the principal surge of immigrants. They were mostly representatives of Georgian nobility and anti-Bolshevik political forces. Particularly refugees of this period are regarded as belonging to the first wave of immigration; they came to the United States mostly via Europe. This process accelerated after the Great Depression, some of them arrived in America even from Manchuria after its occupation by Japan in 1932. Many of them took their families to the states, so Georgian women also appeared in the states, some mixed families appeared, and their assimilation with the mainstream happened quickly.

However, during the second wave – after the end of World War II the number of Georgians didn't enhance. The second wave of Georgians fought on the German side, as captives of the war and they could not return to Georgia because of their political views. Some of them were the immigrants of the first wave living in Europe, who later emigrated from Europe to America to ameliorate economic and social conditions. Majority of them were men, who prevalingly formed mixed families. However, their number was so low that in 1955 it did not exceed 300 (Daushvili, 2003, p. 13)

It's noteworthy, that their second and particularly the

third generations are already naturalized. Most of them managed to get established and contribute to the culture of the new homeland (Nishnianidze, 2008, p. 572). By the 1960s Georgians of both waves turned into a significant intellectual force. Due to some of the prestigious professions they entered the high stratum of the society and gained trust and respect from their colleagues. Their success promoted the popularization of the Georgian culture, its past within their community. However it wasn't big enough.

The most significant number of Georgians arrived in the U.S. with the third wave. This trend involves the period after regaining the Independence of Georgia in 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century. Apart from the fact that the borders became more open, the severe political, social and economic conditions of the country of this time caused the largest wave of emigration in the history of Georgia.

The only official American primary source about the Georgian immigrants in the U.S., is the annual statistics of the Commerce Department, the U.S. Economics and Statistics Administration which provides the data about the number of Georgian immigrants in different years. (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000, p. 10)

Since the number of illegal immigrants is not available, it's hard to determine the exact number of Georgians in the United States.

The number of Georgian immigrants who have become the U.S. citizens within the force of the Refugee Act of 1981-1990s, is unknown. Most presumably they were Georgian Jews and their family members. In most cases they entered the U.S. via another country.

From 1991 to 1998 the number of Georgian immigrants who received U.S. citizenship, was 1834, in 1997 - 425, in 1998 – 100. The numbers are trivial if we compare them with the number of immigrants mainly from South America and Asia of 1965-2000 – 23 million, and almost the same number – 24 million from the southern and Eastern Europe. (Gerstle, 2001, p. 275)

If we follow the statistics of recent years about the number of Georgian immigrants in the United States it has gone down, in reality this number has probably increased due to illegal immigrants, who arrive in the U.S. in different ways (for studies, seasonal or temporary jobs, private or official visas, exchange programs, etc. (Huntington, 2008, p. 182)

The Georgian Diaspora in the U.S. is diverse, the majority belongs to low social layer, but among the last wave immigrants is a segment with higher education, who belongs to the middle class of the American society and some scientists, doctors, painters, actors have entered the upper class.

Conclusion

Invention of ethnicity is a social phenomenon, which has demonstrated unforeseen flexibility in the contemporary world. It has become the sphere of history. For considering the issue of immigrant adaptation, most presumably this approach has crucial advantages over precedent theories. It transfers the focal point of analysis from the banal concern with individual assimilation to a host society to the interactive behavior in which negotiations between immigrant groups and the dominant ethnoculture are indefinite and ambivalent. It puts under question the presumption that the host society unilaterally dictates the terms of assimilation and that is a linear advancement from “foreignness” to Americanization. Instead it implies a dynamic process of ethnicization among diverse sidestream ethnicities and results in changes in several directions. This is a dialectical change due to the mainly political as well as socio-economic condition in the new homeland as well as their original one.

The Italian Americans have displayed great fluency, creativity and efficacy in defining their position in the American reality. This chosen way of refashioning of Italian-American ethnicity will probably continue as individuals plunge into their cultural tank and choose prospects that suit their needs at specific moments in time. What comes up as important in this practice is not how much of the “traditional” culture has survived, but instead the changing uses to which people put cultural symbols and rituals to renegotiate their ethnicity. The new Italian-American ethnic activism has been targeted at anti-defamation campaign to counter bias and negative stereotypes through pressure group strategy. A major part of this campaign was the depiction of the Italian criminality in the mass media.

Italian Americans tried to create internal unity, asserting to being fully American, and carve a more honorable place for themselves in the American history

The number of Georgian immigrants of 1860-1880 period wasn't big and it represented the low social strata. More significant was the first wave of Georgian immigration in the U.S. after the sovietization of Georgia starting from 1920s. They were political refugees, representing anti-Bolshevik forces. Still their number wasn't considerable. In this period the United States went through the first “Red Scare”, after the Bolshevik Revolution and the emigrated people were considered pro-Soviet, although those Georgians had anti-Bolshevik spirit. That was the reason why they had emigrated to the United States via Europe. The number of the second wave Georgians didn't grow significantly, probably because of the second ‘Red Scare’ that the country went through.

The most substantial number of Georgian immigrants

arrived in the U.S. through the third wave after the collapse of the Soviet Union due to the hard social and economic problems arising in Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. We can't get the precise data of Georgian immigrants, as it's impossible to provide the exact information about quite a big number of illegal immigrants, who have been arriving since 1990s to find the economic refuge in the United States.

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