Few today would identify Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* as an inaugurating text of the late twentieth-century “culture wars,” but the book does embody the critical elements that would characterize American discussions of diversity – left and right – in ensuing decades. “This is a beginning book,” the authors wrote portentously in 1963, and indeed it was. On the one hand, their fundamental premise presaged a number of key developments in the United States for the balance of the twentieth century – the centrality of ethnic and racial differences to our conception of the nation, the tenacity of ethnic identity among the children and grandchildren of earlier European immigrants, the evolution of what would later be known as “multiculturalism.” “The notion that the intense and unprecedented mixture of ethnic and religious groups in American life was soon to blend into a homogenenous end product has outlived its usefulness, and also its credibility,” they declared. “The point about the melting pot . . . is that it did not happen” (Glazer and Moynihan, 1971 [1963], p. xcvii). Indeed, the homogenizing trope of the melting pot rapidly fell from grace in public discussion, though only a few years earlier sociologists like Will Herberg had confidently dismissed cultural pluralism as the irrelevant fantasy of “backward-looking romantics” (Herberg, 1960 [1955], p. 20).

But if Glazer and Moynihan’s death knell for assimilationism augured the eventual rise of multiculturalism on the left, so did their tenacious Eurocentrism predict the tenor of the anti-multicultural right. In *Beyond the Melting Pot* Glazer began to formulate what he later called the “ethnic pattern” of American social development, a presumed group-by-group succession of “newcomers” to the scene for whom the voluntary European immigrant stood as the prototype. As in John F. Kennedy’s rendition a few years earlier, Glazer’s America was “a nation of immigrants,” with all the celebrations and erasures that that image entailed. The historical weight of incorporation by conquest or by slavery was of relatively little account in this model, as any group could expect to proceed along roughly the same lines of acceptance, mobility, and success as had the great waves of European immigrants beginning in the 1840s. If the black experience in New York looked markedly different from the Italian, say, it was only because “the Negro immigrant” had not been there as long. This highly Eurocentric formulation of American pluralism was to leave a profound imprint on American conservatism.
American politicians have long recognized the importance of ethnicity organizing the American polity, as have ethnicity’s chief theorists, Glazer and Moynihan included. But current understandings of ethnicity as a highly flexible, situational mode of self-identification, rather than a “primordial” ancestral bond, suggest not merely that ethnicity may occasionally become politically significant (shaping voting blocs, coalitions, or interest groups), but that in a deep sense ethnicity is politics. It is not just that ethnic groups mobilize around this civic question or that; but political circumstances can conjure and consolidate wholly new “ethnic” groups (like present-day Latinos, once a congeries of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Dominicans, and Cubans), or can call older ones out of retirement (like the third- and fourth-generation European Americans who suddenly became Greek, Polish, or Irish in the civil rights era).

The very concept “ethnicity” and its scholarly uses are tightly aligned with the political movements of recent history. Anyone wanting to trace the analyses of “ethnicity” in the academic disciplines could do no better than to borrow the chronological framework of American political history: World War II (when ethnicity presented an appealing conceptual alternative to “race” during the nation’s “war against racism”); the early Cold War (when, as an emptied and innocuous category, it bolstered the language of democracy and offered proof of American openness); and the civil rights and post-civil rights eras (when its uses responded to the acknowledgment that US political culture was organized around group experience after all). Contrariwise, the best roadmap for a summary of ethnicity and its influence in the nation’s political life is the progression of benchmark works in the social sciences: Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole’s *Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945) and Will Herberg’s *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* (1955) endorsed the prevailing assimilationist paradigm of the melting pot; Glazer and Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) announced that perhaps assimilation was not taking place after all; Stephan Steinberg’s *Ethnic Myth* (1981), Micaela di Leonardo’s *Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (1984), and Mary Waters’s *Ethnic Options* (1990) all challenged or fine-tuned what was by then a prevailing pluralist paradigm; and David Hollinger’s call for a *Postethnic America* (1995) and Nathan Glazer’s concession that *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (1997) spoke to the utter triumph of group identity in American political life. Titles like David Reimers’s *Still the Golden Door* (1985), meanwhile, indicated that the resurgence in immigration was further complicating the national mosaic.

This essay charts the strange career of “ethnicity” in both the scholarly and political realms in the latter twentieth century, establishing an intellectual history of “ethnicity” as a social scientific idea, with very close reference to those shifting political imperatives that have governed the discourses of diversity and “difference” since World War II. When Glazer and Moynihan noted that the notion of a melting pot did not “grasp what would happen in America,” they were challenging habits of scholarly inquiry that had reigned for a generation (Glazer and Moynihan, 1971 [1963], p. 13). So were they noting something important about the behavior of their largely “Americanized” subjects. But when they set family values and familial arrangements at the center of their study – contrasting “strong” Italian families with “problem” black families and “confused” Puerto Rican families – they were advancing a formulation that would exert tremendous influence on the politics of civic reliability and belonging for decades to come (pp. 197, 89, 50). The social sciences reflect the major developments of our political life, to be sure; but so do they participate in our politi-
cal life in powerful ways. By the phrase “hyphen nation” I mean to communicate the view from the early twenty-first century in both arenas: current academic thinking about US diversity, and the manner in which millions of Americans have laid claim to “Americanness” by the very virtue of their ethnic particularity.

**Ethnicity, Assimilation, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Liberalism**

Although by the late twentieth century “ethnicity” was almost always invoked as a means of emphasizing particularity, at the moment of its ascendance in social scientific thought the concept carried quite the opposite connotation. As against the biological, fixed traits connoted by the term “race,” “ethnicity” stressed culture—an ideational outlook rather than a condition of birth, a cultural affiliation rather than a bloodline, a set of sensibilities and associational habits that would ultimately be subject to the forces of “assimilation,” in sharp contrast to the stubborn inheritances of “race.” The ascendance of “ethnicity” as an analytic category is best understood as one element in a broader tendency toward universalism in American social thought at mid-century, an effort to revise away the concept of heritable “difference” wherever possible, and to posit (or to celebrate) the vast assimilative capacities of American culture.

David Hollinger has summarized the movement in latter twentieth-century American thought as a steady shift “from species to ethnos”—from a paradigm of human unity to one of ethnic particularity (Hollinger, 1995). He invokes a range of mid-century titles to indicate the powerful impulse toward the universal: Wendell Willkie’s *One World* (1943); Joseph Cambell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949); Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953); and Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man* (1955). Jacob Bronowski’s *Ascent of Man* (1973), a notable latecomer in this tradition, seems the last gasp of what by the 1970s was a dying universalist viewpoint.

For a brief moment in the 1930s and early 1940s, there had appeared an alternative to this universalizing tendency: a pluralist approach to American diversity articulated in works like Carey McWilliams’s *Brothers Under the Skin* (1942) and Louis Adamic’s *Nation of Nations* (1944). But their view was not to prevail: a near consensus on universalism between World War II and the 1960s—an attendant emphasis on “culture,” “ethnicity,” and “assimilation”—was woven of many threads. The common embrace of “ethnicity” in the mid-century social sciences in part reflected a longer-term ascendance of the “culture concept,” beginning earlier in the century with thinkers like Franz Boas and Robert Park. But this thinking began to take on a certain urgency in the 1930s, as events in Nazi Germany rendered the “race concept” increasingly unpalatable in liberal American thought. Figures like Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Ashley Montagu now sought to expunge “race” from social analysis wherever possible. Ashley Montagu labeled race “man’s most dangerous myth,” self-consciously promoting the term “ethnic group” precisely because “the conventional stereotype of ‘race’ is so erroneous, confusing, and productive of injustice and cruelties without number” (Montagu, 1946, pp. 262–4). As a corrective to “race,” in this context, “ethnicity” accomplished far less as a species of distinction than it did as a partial erasure of “differéce”—a universalizing appeal to the underlying “sameness” of humanity and to the assimilative powers of American culture.
Initially “ethnicity” applied only to European immigrants and their children; and, just as the concept’s ascendance marks a homogenizing of whiteness, a lessening of the presumed difference separating an earlier era’s “Hebrews,” “Celts,” and “Anglo-Saxons” (who indeed turned out to be “brothers under the skin”), so does it mark a deepening of the presumed difference separating these former white races from peoples of color. The concept was born precisely as the American colorline was sharpening in new ways – the “Negro Problem,” as Stephan Steinberg writes, “had migrated from South to North” (Steinberg, 1981, p. 24). Nothing marks this development as well as the appearance of Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* (1944), which celebrated America’s universalizing “creed” of openness, egalitarianism, and tolerance, even as it documented the massive violations of these ideals on the basis of race.

Nationalist imperatives during World War II and the Cold War, too, required unifying narratives of universalism. The nation’s touted “war against racism” could not allow deep divisions or particularities within the American populace; nor could the coming war against communism tolerate anything that undermined the notion of pure “Americanism.” Ethnicity, then, was among the symbolic building blocks of American national unity; and ethnic particularism, diluted as it was, became an idiom of universalized American nationality. In popular culture the universalizing and nationalizing gestures of “ethnic diversity” are best captured in the multi-ethnic platoon of the Hollywood war movie. The Irish soldier, the Jew, the Pole, all working together and defending one another – *this* is America. One popular wartime song expressed impatience for the day “when those little yellow bellies / meet the Cohens and the Kelleys.”

Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole’s *Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945) was among the first studies to advance “ethnicity” as an alternative to what had earlier been America’s white “races.” Warner and Srole did not entirely escape the biological concept of “race”: their delineation of “ethnic” groups conspicuously breaks down along the line of “light Caucasians” (like the Irish) and “dark Caucasians” (like Sicilians and “dark-skinned” Jews) (p. 294). The ease with which these groups assimilate in American life falls out predictably according to the differentiations of color. But even if the traces of race are still thick in this conception of “ethnicity,” Warner and Srole’s treatment does reflect the waxing of the “white racial” paradigm and the waning of culturally based “ethnicity”; and in its overall attention to the prospects of assimilation, the book shares a universalizing perspective with other works of the period. Any group whose differences were “minor” (meaning “ethnic”) could expect to be fully assimilated into the nation’s core culture; and indeed, the authors predicted that the future of white ethnic groups as self-conscious groups was limited.

In *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* (1955) Will Herberg advanced a “triple melting-pot” model, by which diverse Americans assimilated into not one but three distinct groups demarcated by religion. But Herberg, too, demonstrated an astonishing confidence in the disappearance of ethnic or nationality groups on the American scene. “America knows no national or cultural minorities except as temporary, transitional phenomena,” he declared. Not only did “the ethnic group [have] no future,” but ethnic pluralists were woefully “out of touch with the unfolding American reality” (Herberg 1960 [1955], pp. 38, 20). If this prevailing view at mid-century captured something significant for a generation whose ethnic differences were declining in salience (as
English-language proficiency increased, and as old ethnic neighborhoods dispersed), so did it neatly answer the imperatives of the moment: the moral imperative of revising the race concept in view of Nazism, and the political imperative among both hot and cold warriors of forging national unity by eliding those divisions born of heterogeneity.

**Beyond the Melting Pot**

Scarcely had the ink dried on Herberg’s pronouncements when both scholarly and vernacular assessments of ethnic particularity underwent a sea change. By 1963 Glazer and Moynihan matched Herberg’s confidence in assimilation with their own confidence in pluralism – the melting pot “did not happen.” A year later, in *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon noted that although particularity in the realm of culture might be fading, “structural pluralism” – ethnicity’s influence in shaping residential, occupational, economic, institutional, and organizational life – still prevailed. By 1971 Michael Novak could celebrate *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*; and by 1981 Thomas Sowell would remark, “The massive ethnic communities that make up the mosaic of American society cannot be adequately described as ‘minorities.’ There is no ‘majority’” (p. 4).

The “ethnic revival,” as it has been called, consisted in part of a “discovery” of ethnic roots on the part of earlier immigrants’ descendants, including a nascent ethnic pride and a newfound passion for genealogy. But it consisted of a number of other, related developments as well: (1) a new attention to ethnic themes in television, Hollywood, and publishing; (2) a dawning consensus among academics that America was less a “melting pot” than a “mosaic”; (3) a series of institution-building movements across the country on behalf of Italian American, Irish, Jewish, or ethnic studies; (4) the emergence of immigration history as a subfield, and the consequent proliferation of distinct “ethnic” histories; (5) the advent of new “ethnic” merchandise and marketing practices, ranging from shamrock keychains to European “roots” tours arranged by American travel agents; (6) the engagement of the state in the construction and celebration of “ethnic heritage,” in projects like the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island restorations; and (7) a move into the rhetorical spaces created by these developments, on the part of working-class whites who had never exactly “lost” their ethnic identifications and lifeways, but who were quick to mobilize on the basis of this newly legitimated public language. Taken together, these developments constitute a wholly new syntax of nationality and belonging, one which put little stock in “assimilation” as it had been touted in the 1940s and 1950s, and which embraced ethnicity not as a universalizing idiom of commonality, but as a marker of significant and enduring particularity.

The “new ethnicity” sprang upon America from many sources. The first, most politically potent source of the ethnic revival was the civil rights movement, which inflected the meaning of ethnic particularism in two ways. First, it introduced a new idiom of group identity and group activism on the American scene – or rather, it legitimated group-based resistance to an older, longstanding reality of group privilege. Of course, the history of the republic is replete with instances where rights and privileges were either accorded or denied, not to individuals but to groups: white male propertyholders, blacks, Native Americans, Mexicans, Chinese immigrants,
women, Japanese immigrants and their children. But American liberalism has long
cherished the notion that “individual liberties” reside at the very core of the nation’s
political culture and values, and that appeals to group rights and protections are
profoundly un-American. Never was this insistence more powerful than during the
Cold War.

Only upon the civil rights successes of 1964 and 1965 did dominant civic dis-
course acknowledge the salience of group experience and standing. This acknowl-
edgment’s effect was electrifying, not only for people of color, whose racialized
experience with society, law, and the market in the United States suggested a politi-
cal kinship with African Americans, but also for the “unmeltable” white ethnics,
whose inchoate social grievances needed only the right vocabulary to become mobi-
лизed. There exists “an inner conflict between one’s felt personal power and one’s
ascribed public power,” wrote Michael Novak, suggesting the limits of white privi-
lege in a 1974 essay (Novak, 1995, p. 347). If European ethnics were indeed white,
according to Novak, in the schemes of American power and economics they were
not that white. As Irving Howe put it, “even in the mid-twentieth century many
American Jews, certainly a good many of those who came out of the east European
immigrant world, still felt like losers” (Howe, 1976, p. 632). The group-based mobi-
lization of the civil rights movement began to suggest a model for action.

But the civil rights movement influenced white ethnic consciousness in another
way, too: the sudden centrality of black grievance to national discussion prompted a
rapid move among white ethnics to dissociate themselves from monolithic white priv-
ilege. The popular rediscovery of immigrant grandparents became one way of declar-
ing, “We’re merely newcomers. The nation’s crimes are not our own.” Reporting an
exchange with a militant Native American speaker who was decrying “what our ances-
tors did to his ancestors,” Michael Novak writes, “I tried gently to remind him that
my grandparents . . . never saw an Indian. They came to this country after that. Nor
were they responsible for enslaving the blacks (or anyone else)” (Novak, 1971, p.
xx). This disavowal is itself open to critique, since it relegated racial injustices to dim
national antiquity, glossing over any more recent discriminatory practices which these
“newcomers” did benefit from, fresh off the boat though they were. Twinned with
the emergent idioms of group mobilization, this move to distance one’s group from
the white monolith of American power could give way to a politics of white griev-
ance that pitted itself against unfair black privilege. As Micaela di Leonardo argues,
in some manifestations the ethnic revival represented a distinctly post-civil rights
brand of mobilization, in which, ironically, “key expressions of white resentment were
couched in a language . . . copied from blacks themselves” (di Leonardo, 1994, p.
175).

A second impetus to the ethnic revival was a powerful current of anti-modernism,
and the common notion that ethnicity represented a haven of “authenticity,”
removed from the bloodless, homogenizing forces of mass culture and suburbaniza-
tion. In the 1920s Horace Kallen had equated assimilation in the American setting
with absorption into an undignified and vacuous modern mass. In his view, “ancest-
ral endowments” ennobled the spirit and provided an oasis in the cultural desert of
modern, mechanized, mass-produced, and mass-consumed lifeways. Beginning in the
1960s, latterday pluralists likewise sought refuge from the banalities of mass society
in the philosophical premodern commune of ethnic particularism. Markers of this
tacit connection between ethnicity, “authenticity,” and anti-modernism include the Native American and peasant motifs of hippie fashion, the late-1960s vogue for Eastern mysticism, and the explicit appeals to mighty, blood-coursing tradition in productions like *Fiddler on the Roof*.

The nationalist pitch of many ethnic subcultures, too, added impetus to the ethnic revival, as contemporary events in the Old World pulled for an emotional involvement in the fate of those whom the migrating generation had left behind. Soviet anti-Semitism, the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, the Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, the “Prague Spring” of 1968, the workers’ movement in Poland – such developments captured the attention and the sympathies of (now) overseas ethnic compatriots, whose diasporic cultures had invested homeland causes with considerable interest. Such engagements in Old World affairs may have been symbolic in that American ethnics had no intention of actually “returning”; but they were organic in that the narratives and mythologies of immigrant (and later “ethnic”) cultures often posited immigrants and their descendants as “exiled” members of the homeland, uniquely placed to serve its cause. In the wake of the Six Day War, for instance, Jewish Americans from across the country volunteered for Israeli military service – over 2,000 in New York City alone.

And finally, the practices of US historiography were themselves reshaping the national narrative, reintroducing those “underdog elements” – like immigrants – who had vanished at mid-century. In an apocalyptic speech before the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1962, Carl Bridenbaugh had decried “the great mutation” of American historiography as a result of the shifting demographics of the university after the war, particularly as a result of the GI Bill. “Many of the young practitioners of our craft, and those who are still apprentices,” he worried, “are products of lower middle-class or foreign origins, and their emotions frequently get in the way of historical reconstructions” (Nash et al., 1997, p. 54).

Bridenbaugh’s observation presaged the shift in historiographic focus and theme over the next generation or two – the rise of the “new social history,” black studies, immigration history, women’s history, and ethnic studies. But the national narrative was already under significant revision. An early signal was Oscar Handlin’s famous remark, “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history” (Handlin, 1951, p. 3). By the time Bridenbaugh stood wringing his hands at the podium of the AHA, the emptied universalism of the early Cold War was already in decline. Along with *The Uprooted*, John Higham’s *Strangers in the Land* (1955), Barbara Miller Solomon’s *Ancestors and Immigrants* (1956), and Maldwyn Allen Jones’s *American Immigration* (1960) had established beachheads for a new subfield; the founding of the Immigration History Society (1965) was but a stone’s throw away; and historians like Rudolph Vecoli, Alice Kessler-Harris, Stephen Thernstrom, and Victor Green were just over the horizon.

Within a context of overdetermined ethnic consciousness – reinvigorated by civil rights discourse, the anti-modern impulse, the register of overseas events in the diasporic imagination, and the revised historical record – a stream of popular literary and cinematic texts emerged, charting the rise of the new pluralist sensibility. After languishing in neglect for some decades, novels like Abraham Cahan’s *Rise of David Levinsky*, Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*, and Ole Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* came...

If *Beyond the Melting Pot* signaled the demise of assimilationist models, and works like *Blood of My Blood* charted a rising countertradition in the 1970s, then a number of key scholarly works in the 1980s indicated just how thoroughly that pluralist countertradition had triumphed in a relatively short time. In *The Ethnic Myth* (1981), Stephan Steinberg argued that “ethnicity” had too often served as an explanatory device where class would have been more suitable. In *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (1984), Micaela di Leonardo, too, argued for a structural and more variegated approach to “ethnic” experience – consideration of factors like gender, class, occupational segregation, and economic stratification – rather than the notions of cultural form and “tradition” that had become common in assessing group histories. Both authors pointed to conceptions such as the “strong Italian family” or the “Jewish passion for education” as developments whose *structural* contexts would fruitfully complicate the picture. And in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), Werner Sollors excavated the “ethnic” character of American literature across several centuries as a means of analyzing the tension between “consent” and “descent” in American political culture. Though quite diverse in their orientations, together such works spoke to the hegemony of the pluralist paradigm in the decades after the 1960s.

The ethnic revival was not merely some quirky family romance, then, nor do St. Patrick’s Day parades or “Polish and Proud” bumperstickers fully convey its import. Rather, the ethnic revival recast American nationality, and it continues to color our judgment about who “we” Americans are and about who the many would-be Americans are who still knock at our gates.

**Ethnic Revival and American Politics – Left and Right**

“The 1960s was the decade of gaps,” reflected Peter Schrag in 1970, “missile gaps, credibility gaps, generation gaps – when we became, in many respects, a nation of outsiders, . . . the mainstream, however mythic, lost its compelling energy and its magnetic attraction” (Rose, 1972, p. 184). This shift in collective identities did not disrupt the normative racial whiteness that had long held the key to “American” belonging and power relations. It did not cut into the notion of consanguine, “Caucasian” whiteness, in other words. But it did suggest and celebrate a distinctly new set of narratives about who these “Caucasians” were and where they had come from. It revised that normative whiteness from what one might call Plymouth Rock whiteness to *Ellis Island* whiteness. In the years that lay beyond the melting pot there arose a new national myth of origins whose central conceit was the “nation of immigrants.” In parsing “ethnicity” both as theory and as politics in the 1960s and after, there is no overestimating the power that the European immigrant saga exerted in American discussion.
First, multiculturalism. In 1977 the *New York Times Book Review* announced the “best” books published in the previous year. Among them were Alex Haley’s *Roots*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, and Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*. The coincidence and enthusiastic reception of these three landmark publications mark the maturation of a long-term development in American intellectual life, the coalescence of the “ethnic revival” and entry into a new phase in the cultural politics of American diversity.

Multiculturalism is now wholly regarded as an intellectual engagement, for better or worse, among various educators, critics, and cultural producers representing peoples of color. Its prehistory is in Black Power and related movements of the late 1960s; its ascendance is marked by the emergence of black studies, the American Indian movement, Ebonics, Afrocentrism, and bilingual education; its pantheon of heroes (or anti-heroes, depending on one’s view) include figures like bell hooks, Vine Deloria, Frank Chin, Sandra Cisneros, Janice Mirikitani, Ishmael Reed, Leslie Marmon Silko, Ronald Takaki, and Rudolfo Anaya. No Richard Gambinos in this tradition; no Michael Novaks or Irving Howes; no *Blood of My Blood*, *Unmeltable Ethnics*, or *World of Our Fathers*.

But the concurrent appearance and celebration of *Roots*, *Woman Warrior*, and *World of Our Fathers* denote a pervasive national thrall, shared across the colorline. In its formative moments, “multiculturalism” was not the exclusive province of peoples of color. Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers* may have spoken to insular, specifically Jewish concerns of peoplehood, collective destiny, and memory, to be sure. But in reckoning with the book’s status as a bestseller, the meanings affixed to the book in the non-Jewish press may be more useful than contemporary scholarly debates among Jews. *Time* magazine set its review of *World of Our Fathers* beneath the telling banner, “Assimilation Blues,” situating Howe’s work within the proximate cultural context of *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*, texts that spoke only imperfectly to the forgotten or distorted – but hungered-for – past of those “many Americans whose non-English-speaking [forebears] were part of the huddled masses that funneled through Ellis Island at the turn of the century.” *Business Week* mused upon ethnicity’s new status as “a literary and political buzzword,” noting that “135 colleges have established ethnic studies programs” before going on to call Howe’s “the most impressive of the recent ethnic books.” The *Christian Science Monitor* ventured that Howe had captured in his Jewish masses “the archetypes of the immigrant (one wants to say American) experience.” This reviewer went on to remark that the greatest Jewish successes in this promised land were reserved not for the immigrants themselves, but “for their children and grandchildren, who moved into the professions and into the suburbs – diaspora.” His equation of professionalization and suburbanization with “diaspora” – a dispersion from the “promised land” of immigrant immediacy – says a great deal about the hungers of the second and third generations. As Marcus Klein remarked in the *Nation*, “Everybody wants a ghetto to look back to.”

For many white ethnics, initial encounters with books like *World of Our Fathers* may have prompted a moment of ethnocentric romance and introspection; but ultimately such encounters could as easily turn the gaze outward. It was but a small step from Irving Howe’s ghetto to the many other ghettos, barrios, and Chinatowns on the US scene; from the magnetism of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to that of Ida B. Wells,
Carlos Bulosan, or Raymond Barrio; from the pluralist integrity of Hayim Zhitlovsky’s “Yiddishism” to Du Bois’s “sorrow songs”; from the recovery of one’s own “roots” to the related recovery projects of ethnic studies broadly conceived: “forgotten” texts like John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, and “forgotten” chapters in the nation’s history – the Trail of Tears, Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Black Codes, the Chinese Exclusion Act. In short, it was but a small step from *World of Our Fathers* to *Roots* and *Woman Warrior*.

To recall the energy for pluralism among white writers like Puzo, Petrakis, and Helen Barolini is to revise the received wisdom on contemporary multiculturalism. Multiculturalism did not unfurl neatly on one side of the color line alone, from The Autobiography of Malcolm X to black studies, *The Color Purple*, bilingualism, and *The Joy Luck Club*. Though they later became objects of derision for some white critics, initially the racial pride movements and even the separatisms among people of color were not cordoned off from the “ethnic revival.” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., seems closer to the mark when he goes ahead and identifies Michael Novak as “an early and influential theorist of multiculturalism” (Schlesinger, 1998 [1991], p. 47).

But in the context of the United States in the 1960s and after, this usable immigrant past has had many uses indeed. If the invigorated, often epic narratives of European immigration established a renewed “we” for the so-called white ethnics (and one that shares deeply in the impulses now associated with multiculturalism), so did they establish an invigorated “we-and-they” which has informed the anti-multicultural agenda. Not only have many influential neoconservative thinkers – Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Milton Himmelfarb, Michael Novak – themselves hailed from the old immigrant ghetto, but so has the immigrant saga held a prominent place in neoconservative thought on questions of discrimination, poverty, and social policy.

In an “Afterword” for a 1965 reprint of Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, the progressive Michael Harrington distinguished between the “old” and the “new” poverty, quite frankly pointing out America’s romance with the old – the experience of “an adventurous poor” seeking “streets paved with gold” (Gold, 1965 [1930], p. 232). Despite Harrington’s recognition, in structural terms, that “the poverty of 1960 is not like the poverty before World War One,” he noted one element in Gold’s narrative that has become characteristic of national debate: “even in [Gold’s] dark view of the slum there are those moments of collective action and self-help which ultimately made the old poverty so dynamic” (pp. 232–3).

The imaginative leap from “dynamic poverty” to inherently “dynamic people” has been fairly thorough in national discussion. On the right, the most elaborate treatment of US political culture and diversity through this lens of the European immigrant experience was Nathan Glazer’s *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975), a treatise on the liberal state and ameliorative social policy. Here Glazer worked out both the comprehensive history and the policy implications of the “ethnic pattern” of group incorporation he had first articulated in *Beyond the Melting Pot*. His resistance to structural interpretations of racism and the “new” poverty was quite explicit: having enumerated many features of American history which indicated that heterogeneity could be a rocky road indeed (including “the enslavement of the Negro, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic movements that have arisen again and again in American life, the near extermination of the American Indian, the maintenance of blacks in a sub-
ordinated and degraded position for a hundred years after the Civil War, the lynching of Chinese, the exclusion of Oriental immigrants, the restriction of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, the relocation of the Japanese and the near confiscation of the property, the resistance to school desegregation, and so forth), Glazer conceded that, were one seeking the single defining characteristic of American society, hierarchy and exclusion might appear a “central tendency.” But, he concluded in a mighty reversal, “I think this is a selective misreading of American history” (Glazer, 1987 [1975], pp. 6–7, emphasis added).

The alternative reading which Glazer proposed, the “ethnic pattern,” derived from three interlacing principles that have informed American political culture over time: (1) that the nation was open to all comers; (2) that any and all groups had to join the political life of the nation rather than nourishing separatisms and establishing new nations of their own; but (3) that in the realms of culture and association ethnic groups could maintain themselves voluntarily (pp. 3–32). The result has been a thriving and open culture in which “the ethnic group is one of the building blocks of . . . society,” and in which “one is required neither to put on ethnicity nor to take it off” (pp. 28, 29). The history of race in this paradigm presents a fairly constant irritant, but it has been neither decisive to American history nor fatally disruptive of the “ethnic pattern.”

In Glazer’s scheme, then, European immigrants stand as the very exemplars of this “central tendency in American history” – its openness, its premium on diversity, and its laissez-faire attitude toward group cohesion and personal identity choices. “We had seen many groups become part of the United States through immigration,” he wrote in an introduction to the 1987 edition, “and we had seen each in turn overcoming some degree of discrimination to become integrated into American society. What this process did not seem to need was the active involvement of government, determining the proper degree of participation of each group in employment and education. It had not happened that way in the past, and one should not expect that it would be necessary for it to happen that way in the future” (p. xii).

Neoconservative writings of the 1970s and 1980s exemplify sociologist Richard Alba’s observation that a romanticized European ancestral experience now determined “the rules of the game” by which other groups will be expected to succeed in American society.” Alba finds “significant political import” in this tendency to define the European immigrant saga as “a prototypical American experience, against which non-European minority groups, some of long-standing on the American continent and others of recent vintage, are pressured to measure themselves” (Alba, 1990, p. 316). Where the mythic European immigrant experience – complete with its epic struggles and its mythology of self-help – provides the template, newer arrivals and the ghetto’s newer residents stake but a weak claim on public sympathies. In this respect the white ethnic revival may have been a protest against assimilationism – even a denial that assimilation had indeed taken place – but so was it a pan-European ethnic celebration of white assimilability.

The celebrated “us” and the implied “them” in this era suggest that the politically opposed currents of “multiculturalism” and neoconservatism paradoxically share an intellectual ancestry. The significance of the ethnic revival resides precisely in the contradictory political logics of diversity which have borrowed the motifs and symbols of European immigration. The tributaries flowing out of this swelling ethnic
consciousness are many: one led to the establishment of ethnic studies or Italian American studies programs across the country; another, to the thin charms of *Crossing Delancey* or the keening for a bygone world in Barry Levinson’s *Avalon*; yet another, to green beer and the *faux* “authenticity” of *Riverdance*. But many have been swept by these currents to the politics and the curricular concerns of multiculturalism, and still others to the social conservatism of the so-called Reagan Democrats.

**Post-1965 Immigration and the Newest American Nativism**

Adding to the passions surrounding American diversity, too, was the massive influx of new immigrants in response to the 1965 Immigration Act. The newest immigration, the largest since early in the century, itself represented a population of staggering diversity. By the 1990 census not only had overall immigration swelled beyond its pre-1965 levels (the foreign-born population in the 1990 census reached some 19.7 million, up from 9.7 million in 1960), but the sources of immigration had also shifted: by the early 1990s Europe was contributing fewer than 15 percent overall – roughly 85 percent of the nearly 1 million immigrants arriving in 1992, for instance, hailed from some thirty Asian countries, seventeen Central and South American countries, thirteen Caribbean countries, and thirteen African countries. Mexico became the single largest sending country, accounting for more immigrants per year than the whole of Europe; and by the year 2000 US Latinos represented the fifth largest “nation” in Latin America. Of the top ten sending countries, only two – the old Soviet Union and Poland – were European. This aroused notice in a context where the word “immigrant” had long meant “European.”

Clearly JFK did not single-handedly invent and propagate the conceit of the *Nation of Immigrants*, though his 1958 volume by that title helped to popularize the phrase. But both Kennedy and Johnson did rely heavily upon it in selling their liberalized immigration policy, and they reaped some unintended consequences into the bargain. On the one hand, the legislation that finally passed in 1965 resulted in a dramatic increase in immigration rates, and the new immigrants’ perceived “difference” from the historic European waves was startling to many. On the other hand, however, the ensuing, decades-long debate on immigration and diversity was all but dominated by the myths about, and romance with, European immigrants that held sway in post-ethnic revival America.

Of central concern has been the immigrants’ predilection and capacity for assimilation, qualities in which Europeans are presumed to have cornered the market. Debate over the 1965 immigration bill itself was largely a disagreement between “harsh” Eurocentrists (who opposed the reform) and “mild” Eurocentrists (who – in a logic inherited from Kennedy – supported it). Speaking for the harsh Eurocentrists, Sam Ervin argued that “there is a rational basis and a reasonable basis to give preference to Holland over Afghanistan, and I hope I am not entertaining a highly iniquitous thought when I entertain that honest opinion.” The worst charge of discrimination that could be leveled at the existing law, he remarked, “is that it discriminates in favor of the people who made the greatest contribution to America.”

In defense of the bill, on the other hand, Edward Kennedy averred that “the ethnic pattern of immigration under the proposed measure is not expected to change as sharply as the critics seem to think.”
The presumed “assimilability” of the prototypical European – whether figured in racial terms or in cultural-geographical terms – is indispensable to the common understanding of the new, non-European immigrants and their prospects. One common argument poses US nationality as a “family” of consanguine Europeans: “The word ‘nation,’” writes Peter Brimelow without apology, “is derived from the Latin nescare [sic], to be born. It intrinsically implies a link by blood. A nation in a real sense is an extended family” (Brimelow, 1995, p. 203). Closely akin to this trope of familial US nationality is the cultural-geographical construction of a grand “European tradition” that unites white ethnic groups just as surely as it excludes those from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. As one writer commented in the *Conservative Review*, “there is no evidence that the European tradition can or will be transmitted to immigrants of African, Asian and Hispanic origin, or to any other of the Third World immigrants who are now entering the country at an increasing rate.” Likewise in *The Path to National Suicide* Lawrence Auster relied upon this common “tradition” as a means of consecrating the earlier waves of US immigration even while deploring the present one: turn-of-the-century immigrants “still had much in common with the earlier Americans; the fact that they were of European descent and came from related cultures within Western civilization made it relatively easy for them to assimilate into the common sphere of civic habits and cultural identity” (Auster, 1990, p. 45).

But this “European tradition” is a recent and uncertain invention, and such assessments of Italian or Slavic immigrants’ “related cultures” have far less to do with the actual relationship of these cultures at the time than with a perceived “kinship” only after a century’s hindsight and a few generations of distance from the Old World. Indeed, at the time American commentators most often sounded remarkably like Lawrence Auster in their assessments of these incoming “Europeans.” According to the New York school superintendent, for instance, “The majority of people who now come to us have little akin to our language; they have little akin to our mode of thought; they have little akin to our customs; they have little akin to our traditions.” Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, for his part, judged them “races most alien to the body of the American people”; they “do not promise well for the standard of civilization of the United States.” Frances Amasa Walker, the Superintendent of the Census, regarded them as “beaten men from beaten races,” who “have none of the ideas and aptitudes which fit men to take up readily and easily the problem of self-care and self-government.”

If the first maneuver in recent nativist thinking has consisted of forgetting the contemporary reception of European immigrants, the next has consisted of establishing positive myths regarding their traits and their virtues. As Nancy Foner writes, “An elaborate mythology has grown around immigration at the turn of the century, and perceptions of that earlier migration deeply color how the newest wave is seen” (Foner, 2000, p. 2). It is here that the loving, epic-heroic imagery of ethnic-revival cultural production comes into full play – *Fiddler on the Roof*, the History Channel’s *Ellis Island*, and even the below-deck scenes from James Cameron’s *Titanic*. It is here that the “dynamic poverty” of an earlier era, in Harrington’s formulation, gives way to common conceptions of the “dynamic people” who inhabited the turn-of-the-century ghetto.

It is this pan-European revision of white ethnicity that allowed an immigrant, Forbes editor Peter Brimelow, to pen the most vociferous “nativist” tract of the
1990s, *Alien Nation*. Nor was it necessarily a contradiction that President Carter began militarizing the US–Mexican border at the very moment that Americans made a bestseller of *World of Our Fathers* and established a national park at Ellis Island. In the years since the great European migration, Walker’s “beaten men from beaten races” have been transformed: in memory they have become clean and moral and hugely striving; they have become joint-stockholders in a unified “European tradition” – they have become, in a word, “America.”

**Conclusion: Race and Ethnicity in the Age of Multiculturalism**

Throughout the years since the 1940s, “race” has been the larger body around which the concept of “ethnicity” has quietly revolved, as a moon around a planet. Each turn in the one has caused an adjustment in the other. In the early war years, the culturally based concept of ethnicity may have seemed an alternative to the biologically based “race concept,” as Montagu and others suggested. But race and its inheritances have been stubborn indeed: the mid-century’s revision of race stopped at the colorline, eradicating “racial” Hebrews and Celts, perhaps, but reifying “racial” blacks. With the advent of the modern civil rights movement, both left and right acknowledged the colorline as a fundamental fact of US social and political life, either to be eradicated or upheld; and among scholars and activists the mid-century paradigm of prejudice gradually gave way to root-and-branch interpretations of racism, not merely as an individualized problem of bigotry, but as a systemic organizer of power and economics. By the 1980s and 1990s, not only had “ethnicity” failed to displace “race” as an analytic category, but – since race had been etched into social reality and encoded in law – no conception of the vicissitudes of “ethnicity” could hold much explanatory power if it failed to reckon as well with the undergirding realities of “race.” This has been apparent in both street-level politics (where ethnic particularism has been among the idioms of white backlash) and in scholarly discourse (where the most sophisticated recent analyses of “ethnicity” have taken up the term in conjunction with racialized categories like white, black, Asian, or Latino).

The burgeoning literature on ethnicity between the 1950s and the 1970s was almost exclusively about “white ethnics,” though the full significance of the modifier “white” long remained invisible. But as whiteness itself claimed attention, the scholarship took some new turns. In *Ethnic Options*, for instance, Mary Waters warned that the whiteness underlying white ethnicity lent a certain flexibility to the ethnic identity of Jews, Italians, Greeks, or Poles in the United States – they *do* choose their grandparents, to some degree – which has in turn led many to misconstrue the “ethnic” constraints experienced by their counterparts on the other side of the colorline. Richard Alba went further in *Ethnic Identity*, tracing the gradual formation of a “European American” identity for whom Polish, Greek, or Irish specificities may lose all salience, but for whom a generic conception of Old World origin – along with the romance of departure, arrival, and resettlement – is fundamentally defining. Although the passion for ancestral narratives is no longer as visible among the “unmeltable ethnics” as it was in the 1970s, still their familial saga of immigration and civic inclusion remains the template of normative “Americanness.”

If heightened attention to racial whiteness informs recent interpretations of “white ethnicity,” on the other side of the colorline *ethnicity* has become an indispensable
instrument for analyzing the racialized experience of many nonwhite groups. Examples include Felix Padilla’s *Latino Ethnic Consciousness* (1985) and Ilan Stavans’s *Hispanic Condition* (1995), which describe the making of a single, politicized “ethnic” group from an array of distinct nationality groups; Mary Waters’s *Black Identities* (1999), which interrogates assumptions about assimilation and mobility by examining West Indians’ “assimilation” into American blackness; and Yen Le Espiritu’s *Asian American Panethnicity* (1992), which maps the creation of an “Asian American” political identity amid the cultural variety of Japanese and Chinese Americans, South Asians, Koreans, Filipinos, and Pacific Islanders.

As the United States population has become still more diverse in the years since the assimilationist predictions of the 1940s, then, and as race has retained its centrality in American social and political life, the concept of “ethnicity” has become not the “race concept’s” replacement, as Montagu and Boas had hoped, but its inseparable twin. “Ethnicity” itself has become a term of particularity rather than of universalism, and it is a particularity whose very form and fluctuation are now understood to depend upon the deeper, enduring social structures of “race.” And just as the formulation of ethnicity in the 1940s was partly a response to the political imperatives of that historical moment, so this turn in the recent race-and-ethnicity scholarship across the disciplines represents a nuanced response to the politics of the post-civil rights period.

“The hyphen performs,” writes Jennifer DeVere Brody; “it is never neutral or natural” (Ma, 2000, p. 155). Early in the twentieth century the hyphen performed an adopted Americanism that was largely rejected in the majority view. In the ‘teens “hyphenated Americanism” amounted to un-Americanism, as far as some were concerned; it was the subject of much surveillance and worry. But two generations later, in that political era “beyond the melting pot,” the Americanism performed by the hyphen has risen above reproach. The United States has become a veritable hyphen nation; and ethnic hyphenation, if not “neutral,” has at least become a most natural idiom of national belonging in this “nation of immigrants.”

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