

Ethnicity and American Social Theory: Toward Critical Pluralism. Gerard A. Postiglione. Lanham (Maryland), New York and London: University Press of America, 1983, 236 pages, \$23.50 hard, \$11.50 paper.

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The discussion about the secularization trend in modern industrialized countries could perhaps be enriched by my recent "discovery" that a one-dollar bill from the days of the Great Depression does *not* contain the hope/dream/ideal "In God we trust," but only the hope/dream/ideal "e pluribus unum." Is this a symbol or metaphor with an underlying meaning? Does this mean, for example, that violating the former dream is neither so serious nor so devious as violating the latter? Is it symbolic of a move toward America as the melting pot? And how far can one go when one entertains the metaphor of a "melting pot"? Does that "unum" simply signify the (least) common denominator of "e pluribus"? Or do we talk about a certain transsubstantiation, a catalyst reaction, in the sense that members of several hundred ethnic groups in the United States produced something more than the neologism of a [sic] "United Statian"? Has God himself become, in a sense, the least common denominator of a multitude of ethnic groups and/or a new but unspecified emergent common denominator?

Postiglione's book represents an attempt to take a fresh look at the ethnicity question. The underlying question seems to be: How does one become and remain an American while recognizing that one may change almost anything *except* one's (immigrant) parents/grandparents/great-grandparents? Taking such a fresh look is not easy, however, since ethnicity was, is, and will continue to be the second most important issue—second only to money—in a dynamic melting pot like the United States. The author groups his presentation around the "melting pot" metaphor: All the major theorists reviewed herein were chosen according to their interpretation of what goes on in the "pot." After reading this book, I was amazed how much one can play around with that metaphor (and thereby discovered why its usage in the ethnicity literature has assumed such confused patterns of meaning). Yet Postiglione does not trace this metaphor back to its origins, as he might well have done. The central variables evolve around substances that change their state from solid to liquid (i.e., they melt). Given identical atmospheric pressures, each pure crystalline solid will undergo that change at a different specific temperature. This process is at least sometimes reversible, so that we may also end up with a "non-melting pot." Furthermore, it becomes essential to define what constitutes a pure solid and under what conditions (e.g., what catalysts?) one arrives at an alloy or—as with mercury—an amalgam. Having tried my own hand at extrapolating from this metaphor, I now return to the outline and content of Postiglione's book, *Ethnicity and American Social Theory: Toward Critical Pluralism*.

In my reading of the book I deciphered four partially overlapping perspectives that the author employed to come to terms with the ethnic phenomenon in America.

- (a) Ideology versus theory, i.e., what ought to be versus what is (the latter being testable, the former not).
- (b) The nature of individuals and society, e.g., is the *Homo sapiens* a migrating and conflict-seeking or a conflict-avoiding and autonomous animal, etc.?
- (c) How do ethnic groups having unequal power positions react to each other in specific situations?
- (d) Do we all "sit in the same boat" in a given society?

With these perspectives in mind, six major representatives of American academia on ethnicity are selected and dissected, each holding a specific space in the mix of answers to the above four questions, ranging diachronically from Frederick Jackson Turner, born in 1861, to Francis Xavier Femminella, born in 1929. The authors between these time poles are Henry Pratt Fairchild (1880), Horace Kallen (1882), Nathan Glazer (1923), and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927). Thus, Postiglione adds an additional perspective by his claim that fresh insight into theories and/or ideologies on ethnicity in America may be gained by setting them in their historical context. For Turner, for example, it required the catalyst of the then-still-existing frontier in order for the melting to occur. For Fairchild, on the other hand, the key factor was not the geographical frontier but rather the unity-providing or -hindering "frontiers" of racial and national proximity; the catalyst had to be the centripetal movement of Americanization where, presumably, racial identity could be "achieved" without racial purity. In case of failure, mongrelization lurked around the corner, which had to be prevented by setting tougher immigration quotas.

Is it not ironical, the author asks along with Kallen (the only "real" immigrant among the ethnicity theorists he discusses), that it was necessary back in 1776 to declare all people as being equal—and then in 1920 apparently necessary to declare people as being unequal again? Here the melting pot disintegrates into a selective sieve, which is to say that "e pluribus unum" ideologically confused the national and the ethnic dimension. My sieve-metaphor simply refers to the observation that the melting process may happen at the national level without necessarily aiming for an ethnic stew that nobody wants to or has to digest. In brief: the Silesian Jew Kallen added to the discussion the notion of cacophonous pluralism.

While these three theorists would have agreed that the melting pot could not reverse into a "non-melted pot," it remained for Glazer and Moynihan to specifically deal with this hypothesis. According to them, an immigrant is not yet an ethnic. Intricate mutual labeling produces an ethnic, whereby there is even a choice of whose grandfather will be considered as defining one's ethnic membership-status (in ethnically mixed marriages, this used to be the grandfather of the male partner). In short: the dynamic process of identity creation allows for the amalgam of novel ethnic definitions, perhaps because of its partially voluntary character. These "new" ethnic groups are then influential groups both in the economy of the marketplace and in the political arena of urban politics.

My metaphorical use of "alloys and amalgams" does not focus sufficiently on the clashes that may be observed in the melting process at the "molecular level." Femminella's reinterpretation of Robert Park's analysis of intergroup processes points in that direction. The partially reversible melting assumes the conflict-ridden processes of cooperation, competition, accommodation and assimilation. What happens, for example, when a member of a subordinate immigrant group faces rejection by the dominant group?

Postiglione defines an ethnic group as an "involuntary group of people (within a larger society) having real or putative common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, who have a sense of peoplehood and a *gemeinschaft* type of relations, and who are of migrant background" (p. 13). Is this definition powerful enough to capture the

above-mentioned potential for clashes between ethnics and the dominant group? In my view, he has also not carried through his own goal, namely to show that "cultural pluralism" is the most accepted (and least ideological) of contemporary theories about ethnicity. Critical pluralism may denote the method in the melting pot, but is there not more to that notion? And is critical pluralism really so free of ideological overtones?

The book would have benefited had it given *serious* attention to what was admitted to be the "most fully developed contribution to sociological theory constructed in the area of ethnicity to date" (p. 27), namely E.K. Francis's *Interethnic Relations*. The reader is left wondering why such applause was not followed by a presentation and discussion of some of Francis's ideas. Furthermore, there are two very annoying characteristics of Postiglione's book that should be mentioned. First, the book has *not* been proofread. Second, the author seems to have had in mind a reader not much above the level of a junior high school student; long quotations from the six theorists are followed by extremely repetitious interpretations of these quotes.

Who should read this book? It is not aimed primarily at professionals or graduate students. I would only recommend it to those graduate students who are minoring in ethnic relations. To graduate students in sociology, I would even warn that the author's naive distinction between conflict theory and functionalism would have barely been "passing" fifteen years ago. On the other hand, the book is—as the author correctly claims—a very useful supplementary text for undergraduate social science courses.

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