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The Prominence of Ethnicity in the 21st Century

Over the past decade many scientific advances, such as airplanes, telephones, satellites, and internet, have connected people from all over the world. Countries that used to be completely isolated from the rest of the world are now closely connected through economic, scientific, political, and even cultural interests. The Harry Potter novels, written in English and originally sold in England and America, were translated into over sixty languages and distributed worldwide. Major Motion Pictures produced in Hollywood California are no longer kept local but shown in multiple countries. At the start of the 21st century, many sociologists predicted the reduction of ethnicity because of deteriorating barriers to human uniformity. However, learning from history and understanding the malleability and strength of human ethnicity makes it reasonable to conclude that ethnicity will be persistent into the future, despite the rise of globalization in the modern era.

Author Stephen E. Cornell writes “The latter half of the 20th century, by numerous accounts, was supposed to see a dramatic attenuation of ethnic and racial ties.” The movement of the world toward a global community where internet, phones, politics, fashion, and even entertainment created international relationships between people of different ethnicities, lead people to believe in the discontinuation of “premodern” ethnicity. Cornell writes about ethnic and racial ties as “seemingly parochial, even premodern attachments” which were “expected to decline as bases of human consciousness and action, being replaced by other more

comprehensive identities linked to the vast changes shaping the modern world” (Cornell 5). However, these “comprehensive identities” did not replace pre-modern ethnicity, but were incorporated into traditional ethnic identities.

When addressing the question of ethnicity in modern times, it is important to consider personal identities as one of the major factors in determining the role of ethnicity. Although personal identities are shaped by physical characteristics and past family history, they still remain independent from objective facts. For example, a black man who worked as a slave on a plantation is not guaranteed to have the same personal identity as a black man who slaved on the very same plantation. Max Weber, a respected sociologist, defines ethnicity as “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration” (Weber 389). An online dictionary defines ethnicity as “ethnic traits, background, allegiance, or association (dictionary.com). The words “subjective” and “association” are used to describe ethnicity because many people identify themselves with a certain ethnic group despite objective facts telling them they belong to a different one.

In his textbook, Cornell uses the Armenians to describe this association. The Armenians fled their homeland to come to America. They lived in the U.S. for a period of four generations. Although it may be assumed that the Armenians assimilated into the American ethnicity, Cornell writes that “They have not lost their identity. They have held on to it, but they also have transformed it (Cornell 11). The Armenians did not lose their identity, but they didn’t keep it either. Instead, they formed a new personal identity which cannot be described as solely Armenian American.

In the early 20th century the United States saw “race” as the top factor in determining ethnicity. Rosenblum and Travis, the authors of “The Meaning of Difference”, wrote that at the start of the 20th century racial identity took priority over religion, origin, training, education, language, values, morals, lifestyles, etc...(Rosenblum 51) Classifications of different races made by the U.S. Government was once limited to White, Black, and Other. However, after the long battle for civil rights and increased understanding of ethnic diversity, classifications began to change. Identities such as “Pacific Islander, “Native Hawaiian” and many others began to appear on national surveys. People were also given the right to choose more than one ethnic group that they identified themselves with (Cornell 22). Rosenblum and Travis describe ethnic groups as “clusters of people living in demarcated areas developing lifestyles and unique languages that distinguish them from other social communities” (Rosenblum 46). This definition shows that ethnicity is not fixed, but is “developing”. Despite living in the same country for over a century, a nation of diverse people did not assimilate into one ethnic group. Instead, they formed and developed into multiple ethnic groups, with each group unique in its own history and social community.

Audrey Smedley, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Department of sociology and Anthropology writes that “‘race’ is a cultural invention” and “bears no intrinsic relationship to actual human physical variations, but reflects social meanings imposed upon these variations. (Smedley 690) In other words, race and ethnicity are not defined solely by physical characteristics, family history, and real facts. They are also defined by social views and personal identifies. In the upcoming modern era, where an even stronger global community is predicted,

ethnicity will continue its persistence mainly because personal identities will never become universal.

Speaking in regard to the persistence of ethnicity, I believe that ethnicity will always persist, whether it be now or in the future. I do not believe that a group of people with a unique history and unique culture (and I define the word “culture” as social activities shared within a community of people with similar personal identities) can completely assimilate into another ethnic group. Culture may be integrated and even physical characteristics will carry over through interbreeding, but ethnic identity can never be fully assimilated. Just like the Armenians, who fled their homeland to come to the United States and spent four generations in America, many other ethnic groups still kept their unique ethnicity despite spending decades in America. Of course, these ethnic groups no longer share the same ethnic identity that they had when they just immigrated, but instead of assimilating into Americans, they simply transformed into an entirely new and entirely unique ethnic group.

Even in the modern 21st century, with the rise of globalization and the slow diminishment of geographical, psychological, political, and cultural barriers to assimilation, ethnic groups will continue to thrive. Ethnic groups will be either born, continued, or transformed, but they will never be “attenuated”. People born with distinctive physical features will identify with people who share similar features. Likewise, people born into similar religious groups, geographical locations, and social customs will identify with each other. However, when there is political, social, and economic interest, the identities will change. People will change. Personal identities will change to form new ethnic groups or join old ones. Even in the modern world ethnicity will persist into the future.

Works Cited

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