



By Brown Brothers, ca. 1908
Immigrant children, Ellis Island, New York.
Vintage print.
Records of the Public Health Service.
(90-G-125-29)



“Melting Pot” or “Tossed Salad”?

Multiculturalism in the United States

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Anthropology and the Study of Cultural Diversity

- anthropology – the holistic study of human beings, focusing on social structures and cultural practices and symbols;
- sister discipline to sociology, but with focus on participation-observation fieldwork (参与观察调查)
- cultural relativity: no one culture is “better” than another; not moral relativity, but “critical cultural relativism”
- anthropology as “the comparative study of common sense, both in its cultural forms and in its social effects”; the difficulty is in determining what is “common” and what makes something make sense

My Research Interests

- Religion and Politics

Did fieldwork in a Hakka Catholic (客家天主教) village in Guangdong, Meizhou (广东省梅州市) between 1993-2001

- Food, Popular Culture, and Globalization

Did fieldwork in Beijing (1993-1995) and rural Guangdong on fast food consumption and other elements of popular culture

- Social and Cultural Impacts of Science

Did fieldwork in Shanghai (1999-2007) on popular uses of technology (computers and the internet, photography) and other issues in science and technology studies; science fiction (科幻) studies

- Sports and Civil Society

Most recent research project, started in 2001; fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai.

- Diaspora Ethnicity

Research on Hakka ethnicity, Chinese diaspora; Asian-Americans

Definitions of Culture

- The Classic Definition: Culture...taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society. (E.B. Tylor)
- Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns - customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters -as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms - plans, recipes, rules, instructions - for the governing of behavior. (C. Geertz)

More terms

- race (种族), ethnicity (族群), and nationality (民族) do not mean the same thing;
- race is a biological term that is not relevant in studying human beings (although it is still used colloquially)
- nationality is largely a political term (from Marxist thought) where the state has recognized different groups
- the concept we most commonly use is ethnicity, as in the United States is a multi-ethnic country (as is China)
- “melting pot” – assimilation of immigrant population into the culture of the dominant society
- “tossed salad” – recognition of multicultural composition of a society;
- White Americans – the descendants of the older European migrations – are now a declining proportion of the American population.

Post 9-11 Public Service Announcement



Reality of American Ethnic Diversity

- “Their zip code area, like the entire state, was 30 percent nonwhite, mostly Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, and African American, and 20 percent foreign-born. ... A neighbor on one side of Eseta and Manu’s house was Euro-American, replacing an Iranian immigrant family which had left. El Salvadorans lived on the other side, and their boy was a close friend of Lio Jr’s. Eseta bought fruit from the “Chinese ladies”; Malia worked for an eastern European immigrant; Mexican vendors sold migrants their Tongan food; “friend” mentioned at work included Americans of Europe, Filipino, Central American, and Japanese descent”. (Cathy Small 1997:69)

Waves of American Immigration

1. early 17th – mid 19th century; northwest Europeans settling the new land
2. end 19th- early 20th century; southern and eastern Europeans
 - unskilled laborers, Jews escaping pogroms
 - competing ideologies: Anglo-conformity, the melting pot, cultural pluralism



Waves of American Immigration



Chinese community in Seattle, 1900



Portrait of Chinese-American women, Seattle 1900

Wing Luke Asian Museum

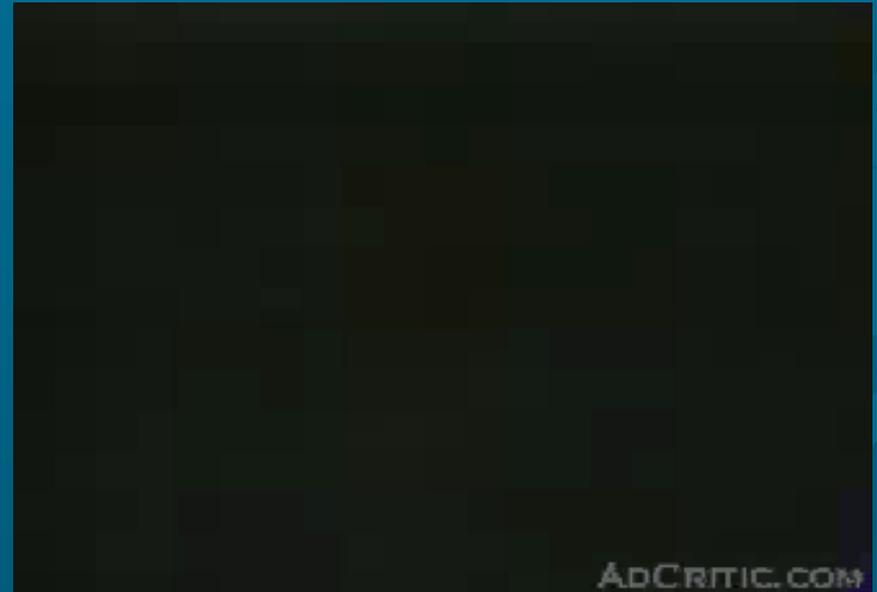
3. African Americans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, from south to north
 - urbanization of African-Americans; necessary for the political modernization (Civil Rights movement)
4. Latinos, Asians from late 20th century to present
 - changes in immigration policy, global political shifts

Commonalities in the Migrant Experience

- central historical experience: displacement
- nativism surfaces most sharply in the regions and cities in which immigrants became overwhelmingly concentrated
- assimilation model: natural evolutionary process in which immigrants/minorities would become like the dominant majority population;

Assimilation

- cultural assimilation: behaving like the dominant population (i.e., drinking Coca-Cola)
- this is what was assumed by the majority of Americans (and many groups of immigrants themselves) to happen over time
- but this assumes some kind of homogenization that erases bonds of identity that weakens social relations that often help immigrants (kinship, religion, native place associations, rituals and cultural practices)
- structural assimilation: integration of immigrants into major institutions of society; this can be accomplished while different ethnic groups maintain their identity and cultural practices



Problems with Assimilation model

- manner of incorporation: initial and continuing placement and access of various groups within the economic, political, and educational institutions of the society; this resulted in social inequality
- internal colonialism model, race; concentration of minorities could lead to rejection of assimilation
- racism – continued rejection by dominant society of people trying to assimilate
- primordialist perspective – perceived attributes and connections arising from kinship; assumed connection between immigrant communities and their former societies



Wing Luke Asian Museum

Children marching with flags,
Japanese Internment camp in
Minidoka (Idaho), ca. 1943

Multiculturalism

- a form of identity politics that asserts that cultural diversity is important; movement for change that challenges the cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group
- linked closely to “structural assimilation” – minority groups gaining access to various opportunities (such as college admission)



“Journey to China 2006” group that I took to Shanghai and Xinyu, Jiangxi in February

Problems with Multicultural Model

- problem of reifying culture
 - assumes homogeneity within an ethnic group
- objectifies culture – marks certain practices, clothing, etc. as markers of ethnicity, reinforcing stereotypes
- emphasizes boundaries between ethnic groups and can prevent bridging efforts



Melting Pot or Tossed Salad?

- strengths and weaknesses to both positions; more recent political issues involve language (US does not have an official language), legislating equality, etc.
- cultural diversity as a resource; use of cultural practices as a technology (i.e., ethnopharmaceuticals, Navajo for secret code)
- important issue in cultural politics in the United States and throughout different parts of the world;
- Huntington and many others have pointed to culture as the most important source of conflict; multiculturalism is a local manifestation of globalization in the United States
- understanding issue of cultural diversity important in age of globalization – similar issues at a larger scale; problems of homogeneity (sameness, universality) and heterogeneity (difference)



Senator Barak Obama (IL, D); possible presidential candidate

- maybe the best choice is not the melting pot or tossed salad, but the stew – where the different ingredients help make the other ingredients what they have become; ethnicity as co-constitutive, in dialogue

Questions/Comments?

- Thank you for you time!
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