

Critical Analysis 1:
Ethnicity: A Structural or Cultural Force?

Elmo M Recio

SOC 210 - Race and Ethnicity
Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology Department
College of Arts and Sciences
Drexel University

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Abstract

In this first critical thinking paper we will focus on the concepts of “race” and “ethnicity”. How are these concepts used in the different texts we are reading? How does each reading represent race and ethnicity in American society, its social construction, meaning, history, &c. Drawing on the texts discuss how they implicitly and explicitly emphasize structural forces or cultural forces and whether they focus on assimilation or conflict between groups. Discuss the strengths or weakness of the ways each author employs the theories.

Introduction

The texts used in the course are Stephen Steinberg’s *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* and Alan Peshkin’s *The Color of Strangers, The Color of Friends*. These two books concentrate on various aspects of race and ethnicity through very different means. Peshkin’s book is a case study of a particular town and its ethnic and racial struggles throughout the years. On the other hand, Steinberg’s book is a critical analysis of race and ethnicity in America.

The differing perspectives between the two authors are quite evident in how they deal with the various ethnic issues, and “crises.” Where Steinberg concentrates on the more abstract issues plaguing ethnicity, Peshkin grounds these issues with insight as to the “real world.”

Antinomy

Steinberg concerns himself mainly with structural theories, dealing with cultural theory on an adhoc basis. For example, in Chapter 3 of Steinberg’s book, when addressing the issue of the Jewish well-adjusted trend, he states a structuralist point of view that the Jews worked in occupations that prepared them for roles in a modern industrialised America. [Steinberg, p. 95] On the other hand, references made to cultural theory were often rebutted, for example, as when discussing Milton Gordon’s view that the “cultural baggage” of values carried over aided their rapid rise.

Peshkin, on the other hand, stresses (implicitly) the very cultural relativism that Steinberg believes is the cause of fearfulness of making any statement concerning the social significance of ethnic patterns, “lest they be accused of contaminating their research with personal bias.”

Steinberg looks at ethnicity as a loss. He takes a very strict, and critical view on many of the issues surrounding assimilation. He states that immigrants were at the bottom of the social and economic class. Combined with their upward class mobility drive, and decreased rejection, creates an *inevitability*. This inevitability is the assimilation of their ethnic group.

There are external pressures to assimilate as well. Steinberg points towards the lack of control of the school system by the immigrants as an external force to assimilate the children (the next generation.) Peshkin, however, points to the control of the school system by the Sicilian immigrant group, beginning in 1940 with Tommy Costa. They controlled the school system from 1948 through 1973. However, by this time, the Sicilian immigrant group could be considered (for all intensive purposes) assimilated. By the time black riots started, what was left of the Sicilian whites, were considered as white.

Keeping By Letting Go

The paradoxical aspect of the issue of assimilation is that in order to keep your culture, you have to let go parts of it. [Steinberg, p. 68, 71] Steinberg goes over the ethnic identification as a matter of technical definition. If indeed it is a matter of technical definition, then where is the substance, or quality for the maintenance of an ethnic identity.

Peshkin glazes over this issue when speaking to Carla Estrella and the embarrassment felt by others of the same ethnic group who misbehave. He asks whether it's a loss in one's ethnic identity if they are not embarrassed by shameful actions of others in the same ethnic group? Even if the descendant had no real ties to the foreign country's citizens, could this "technical" definition be applied. Could embarrassment alone be a signalling factor that one still had an ethnic identity?

Another example from Peshkin is the introduction of ethnic historical courses in the public school system. Wanting to abate the pressures from ethnic conflict, the school board of Riverview decided to introduce ethnic courses. Peshkin reports this to have happened in the early 70's and late 60's. But the courses were ephemeral; they suffered from the students' declining interest, and the mindset that "they did not need special instruction about themselves." [Peshkin, p. 91]

Steinberg points out that this resurgence in the late 60's was symptomatic of the ethnic crisis. After all, why would one be searching for one's roots, if one hadn't already lost them. [Steinberg, p. 73] Although this may seem

contrary to the Peshkin findings (due to the students' reactions,) it must be noted that the students are well underway in the assimilation process. The people calling for the initiation of the classes were the older citizens of Riverview (the school board, for example.)