

Critical Analysis 3: The Ethnic and Racial Assimilation

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Abstract

Reflecting upon the work of Peshkin and Steinberg what are their main points of agreement and disagreement? Be sure to talk about the relative weight each gives to structural and cultural arguments as well as the goals of each study.

Introduction

Peshkin's book, *Color of Strangers, Color of Friends*, mainly concentrates on the play of racial and ethnic relations among members of a small city in the West. Whereas, Steinberg's book, *The Ethnic Myth*, is a structural view on the issue of racism and ethnicity. They both, however, tackle the problem of assimilation which exists in ethnic and racial mingling. Here, is where a point of comparison may be drawn between the two works.

Racial Aspect

Peshkin points out several issues between blacks and other main streams that shed new light on specific incidents of racial assimilation. While Steinberg points towards the structural factors involved in the racial assimilation of the black people during and after the civil war which may be applicable today.

Peshkin finds a distinction between acting and being white, if you are black: they are not the same[II, p. 190]. Although the common wisdom at Riverview High School is to “be proud of what you are,” there are certain attitudes that are taken up within Riverview when it comes to cross-group mingling. These attitudes are based on one’s surroundings. The black students, when around other of their peers, whom are also black, tended to “act like black people.” But when they were around other ethnic groups they tended to see themselves as “just acting human.” These people whom are able to change their attitudes based on their cultural surroundings become good at fitting in. More so, because they see this as a necessity they also realise, at some level, that it’s a departure from the norms of their social peers.

The “acting black” stigma is enforced, both from within, and from the outside. Many of the older generations say “acting black” or “acting your colour” to the younger ones, and are not giving complements. They associate “acting your colour” with being disruptive, loud, &c. Laterally, the stigma is shown in the use of the term nigger to describe someone’s mode of (negative) behaviour. But the opposite is also true: “No other ethnic group confronts itself with such an array of admonitions: acting ritzy, sophisticated, or proper; acting black, your colour, or like a nigger; acting better than you are, white or uppity...”[II, p. 198]

In sum, Peshkin states that black students that tend to modify their behaviour open doors to friendships otherwise closed to them. And that black students, above all other ethnic groups, demonstrate the ambiguity of identity at Riverview High. I gather that Steinberg would argue that this ambiguity, or loss of placeness, dislocation, &c. is based on structural factors that far supercedes the community in locale and history. These structural factors associated with being black may be rooted in the powerlessness of the black community to be able to fit in (especially with the industrial labour of the North in the post-reconstruction era.)

When the blacks were freed in the South, the question turned into “now what?” What would happen with all of the South’s black citizens? There was now direct competition to the North’s immigrant labour force. So the industrial tycoon in the North could say to their increasingly disgruntled workforce, that if the workforce didn’t do the job under their terms, they would replace the immigrant workforce with “free” labour from the South. This competition spurred a very racist sentiment from the Northern immigrant workforce.

Point in fact, Steinberg argues, is that the South was fully dependant on their black labour, and begrudgingly admitted it. They tried everything to bring in immigrant labour. But many of them had their eyes on the pie. And if they couldn't get a piece of it, they *had other channels open to them in the North*. [I, p. 185] Assimilation of the southern blacks was not to happen in the North, and the South would try everything to keep the blacks where they were.

Ethnic Aspect

Ethnic assimilation occurred with varying rapidity among different ethnic groups. But the point that Steinberg makes is that it happened, and is happening. More interestingly is that when ethnic groups, like the Jews in higher education¹ attempt to infiltrate an ethnically homogenous system they pull out the pluralism and democracy card. However, once these ethnic groups are in and sharing the “pie” with the others, they tend to shut the doors behind them. The Jewish vocality against the affirmative action statements showed this very well.

Turning to Peshkin, we see that assimilation amount ethnic groups like the Filipinos is ubiquitous. They understand that to make it in the outside world, they must get good grades and get on the college academic track. This means learning the language and eschewing the various items that distinguish them from the rest of Americans. Entry and acceptance into the American way of life constitutes various “tests of linguistic, social and other behavioural skills relating to fitting in.” [I, p. 199] The students tend to *want* to assimilate; the drive towards assimilation, and the lack of internal stigmatism from their peers (i.e.: a Filipino student would never be accused of “acting white”) allows them to move forward in society. As Steinberg argues: had blacks been allowed to compete for industrial jobs in the North (the same jobs that provided opportunity for millions of immigrants) they would be in a similar class status as Italians, Irish, Poles &c.

Conclusion

Steinberg states that the blacks exclusion from the industrial jobs of the North stalled their assimilation process. Now, however, the very same reasons

¹See the section entitled: “The Harvard Affair” in Peshkin page 238.

for their stall of upwards social mobility, is being propagated from within: the internal stigma surrounding assimilation. I believe that if blacks are to climb the social class system, it is imperative that they assimilate and start “acting white.”² This, however, is not limited to the blacks of this country; this may be applied to whichever ethnic, or racial group, to sexuality, in regards to gay right, to feminism &c. Pluralism is both a curse and a blessing: if it is not handled correctly, it can entrap and chain a people within a system of class and ethnic dominance. On the other hand if it is handled with care, the same care that you would give carrying a new born baby, it can empower. Sadly enough, this country has chosen the former.

Steinberg puts it best when he states racial and ethnic pluralism is very unstable. [I, p. 256] He argued that a pluralism based on systematic inequalities is, by definition, unstable because ethnic groups at the “bottom” of the pile, will have little reason to maintain the very items that make them different. In other words, the ethnic, or racial minority will have very little incentive to keep what makes them different (read: what allows for their group’s stigmatism) alive. Instead, those at the bottom will drop, or alter their ethnic and racial differences in hopes of being able to achieve upwards class mobility.

As we approach the elections of the year 2000 in America, and possibly the four years reign of Lieberman as vice-president, it would be interesting to see whether his Jewish cultural values will hold up against the strain of the latent social, political and class stigma associated with the resident Jews in America.

References

- [I] Steinberg, Stephen. *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America*. Beacon Press, Boston: 1989.
- [II] Peshkin, Alan. *Color of Strangers, Color of Friends: The Play of Ethnicity in School and Community*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991.

²Keep in mind the difference between “acting white” and “being white.”