

Understanding Ethnicity and Ethnic Incorporation in the United States

Generally, a group distinguishable on the basis of religion, race, language, national origins, immigrant status, or any combination of these *becomes* an ethnic group if it faces subordination or exclusion from a society's opportunity structures on the basis of these ethnic markers. The greater the degree or intensity of the subordination or exclusion, the greater the degree of the ethnic group's consciousness, identity, and tendencies toward ethnic solidarity. Hechter describes this process of creating ethnicity as a "cultural division of labor" where a "superordinate" or dominant group in a society "attempts to regulate the allocation of social roles such that those commonly defined as having high prestige are reserved for its members." Conversely, individuals from the less advanced (subordinate) group are denied access to the roles.¹

Hechter used this formulation in his study of the "Celtic fringe" in British national development to explain why Wales and Scotland were incorporated into the United Kingdom whereas Ireland pursued nationalism and independence. The explanation for these differential patterns of ethnicity is the greater extent of oppression of the Irish; as Hechter writes, was due to "the especially brutal policies perpetrated by the English and Anglo-Irish settlers in Ireland."²

Hechter's formulation also explains why in the United States the Catholic Irish became an ethnic group and the so-called Scotch-Irish did not. The Scotch-Irish—Protestants—were the first Irish immigrants to the United States, coming in relatively large numbers from the colonial era to the 1830s. Confronting little oppression or exclusion from America's opportunity structures, they were fairly quickly incorporated into the Anglo-Saxon or WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) community and ceased to be ethnic.³ And when their fellow Catholic Irish nationals began to immigrate in large numbers starting in the 1840s the Scotch-Irish

were as hostile to them as they had been in Ireland and as were the Anglo-Saxons, whether in England or New England.⁴

This is not a study of the election of the first person of Irish ancestry to the presidency but the first person of Irish Catholic ancestry. Three Scotch-Irish have been president: Andrew Jackson, James Buchanan, and Chester Arthur (both of Jackson's parents were born in Ireland and one of Arthur's and Buchanan's).⁵ But Jackson, Arthur, and Buchanan were not "ethnic" Americans. In 1960 the Scotch-Irish vote for Kennedy was indistinguishable, north and south, from the vote of other white Protestants.⁶

Finally, just as Hechter's understanding of ethnicity explains Irish nationalism compared to Scotch and Welsh incorporation on the British Isles, it also explains the intensity of Irish Catholic "nationalism" in the United States compared to other European immigrant groups with the exception of Jews.⁷ At least in New England, Catholic Irish ethnic solidarity exceeded that of other Catholic groups because of the intensity of their exclusion from the opportunity structures in Ireland and the United States. Hechter's formulation also explains the intensity of black ethnic nationalism because in their homelands and in the United States no ethnic group has faced greater oppression and a more rigid cultural division of labor than Africans. For example, on the cultural division of labor specifically between Irish Catholics and African Americans, Ignatiev writes, "At every period, however, the 'white race' has included only groups that did 'white man's work.' But what was 'white man's work'? In the case of the Irish, 'white man's work' could be defined as work they did, when it was precisely their status as 'whites' that was in question. Since 'white' was not a physical description but one term of a social relation which could not exist without its opposite, 'white man's work' was simply, work from which Afro-Americans were excluded. Conversely, 'black man's work' was work monopolized by Afro-Americans."⁸

Ethnicity and Race

"It is superficial and inaccurate," Matthew Holden Jr. writes in *The Politics of the Black Nation*, and "implicit snobbery" to define Italian or Irish Americans as ethnics "but Anglo Protestants as non-ethnic. Each is as ethnic as the other. That implicit snobbery has made it possible for social scientists (and others) to suppose that 'ethnicity' was essentially abnormal, undesirable and would in due course disappear. Such estimates are wrong. Ethnicity is one of the fundamental bases of social organization and social division and is at least as persistent—and

often more divisive politically—than social class.”⁹ Holden’s observation highlights the fact that in the United States discussion of ethnicity in both popular and academic discourses often evokes strong feelings and biases.

Since Max Weber first defined the term in the 1920s, social scientists have defined ethnic group in multiple ways.¹⁰ Weber’s classic definition understood an ethnic group as “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of colonialization; the belief must be important for group formation, furthermore, it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists.”¹¹ Most modern scholars of ethnicity accept Weber’s definition, as for example, Schermerhorn’s slightly modified formulation: “A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood.”¹²

In Hechter’s formulation, however, Weber’s definition points only to the potential for an ethnic solidarity group, providing necessary but not sufficient conditions for its expression politically. The sufficient condition is subordination, oppression, or exploitation, real or perceived, on the basis of this subjective belief or identity.¹³ In other words, “much of the dynamics of interethnic relations derive from the structure of dominance and subordination involved in the majority-minority relations.”¹⁴ If a group confronts little or no subordination based on its ethnicity then its manifestations of its ethnicity are likely to be largely symbolic or cultural. However, the more rigid the ethnic-based subordination or exclusion of a group, the more likely it is to express its ethnicity politically as well as culturally.

In the United States race has constituted the most rigid and the most exclusionary basis of ethnic subordination—much more than religion, national origin, or language. In the case of African Americans, the rigidity of their subordination was created and sustained on the basis of skin color, a physical type that made them distinctive and visible when compared to European ethnic immigrant groups.

The more rigid nature of the subordination of blacks has led many scholars of black politics to contend that race is not just another ethnic attribute like religion or nationality, but instead belongs in a separate analytic or theoretical category. Leslie McLemore, for example, writes: “The very foundation of a theory of black politics rests on the clear understanding that Afro-Americans are a *racial* group and not an ethnic group. . . . When we speak of a racial group we are referring to those minorities in a society which are set off from the majority not only by

cultural differences but in a more profound sense by skin color (high visibility) and the near total inability of that group to assimilate into the larger society.”¹⁵ In this view blacks in the United States should not be considered an ethnic group because their black skin color combined with the tenacity of white racism makes their full incorporation into American society impossible. As Barnett puts it, “Racism, therefore, is a fundamental factor that makes the black situation distinctively different from that of all white ethnic groups.”¹⁶

In the course of this study, considerable historical and empirical evidence are developed that demonstrates the difficulties of black incorporation in the United States when compared to the Catholic Irish. Nevertheless, whether black incorporation is impossible is an empirical question that should not be settled a priori. In the 1940s, Ralph Bunche wrote that it was inconceivable that an African American could ever be elected president; a governor, a senator, a cabinet officer perhaps, but president, never.¹⁷ In 2008 the impossible happen. The near full incorporation of blacks into sport and popular culture (discussed in chapter 6) was considered impossible in the 1940s when Jackie Robinson became the first major league baseball player.

As a scholar of black politics for almost four decades I am pessimistic about the likelihood of the full incorporation of African Americans into U.S. society, polity, or economy, and the evidence from this study tends to confirm that pessimism. However, awareness of the differences in the experiences of African Americans and the Catholic Irish should not blind us theoretically to how much they have in common not only with each other but also with other bases of dominance—subordination such as class, gender, and sexuality. As Isajiw writes, “The scholar of ethnicity must be as aware of the varying conditions of ethnicity over time as of all the conceptual and theoretical possibilities of it.”¹⁸ Ultimately, whether African American ethnicity constitutes an impossible barrier to full incorporation is an open question. Theoretically, historically, and empirically this book is a contribution to answering that question.

A Theoretical Model of Ethnic Group Incorporation

Social scientists have generally assumed that, at least in developed societies, over time ethnic groups will wither away as cultural divisions of labor are eliminated, and opportunity structures are opened to all on the basis of individual attributes.¹⁹ In this view, in well-ordered societies rational individuals will organize their politics based on class interests

rather than irrelevancies such as race or religion. Hechter models this process of the “deethnicization” of groups into “three analytically separate black boxes,” which I use—slightly modified—to compare Irish Catholics and African Americans.²⁰

The first is cultural integration or incorporation, which involves the erosion of distinctive ethnic group cultures and the absorption of elements of their cultures into the mainstream or national culture. Evidence of this process includes a common national language and symbolism, and the decline of racism, nativism, and invidious ethnic stereotypes. It also includes the integration of members of the group into the arts, universities, sports, popular culture, and other institutions that “govern the aspirations and values of the masses.”²¹ Finally, interethnic marriage may be one of the most important indicators of cultural integration.

The second box is economic incorporation. Inclusionary opportunity structures overtime should result in similarities among religious, nationality, and racial groups in education, occupation, income, wealth, and poverty. This does not require exact equality or correspondence between the groups, but it precludes the existence of wide socioeconomic disparities as manifested in concentrated poverty among any particular group.

The third box is political incorporation in which ethnicity ceases to play a significant role in the formation or expression of the group’s political attitudes and behavior. Instead, such attitudes tend to be shaped by social class. Second, ethnicity ceases to play a major role in the group’s claims on the state. Rather citizens make demands based on their class positions or interests deriving from other than their ethnic origins. Finally, political incorporation requires some rough degree of parity in holding elective and appointive offices, or at least ethnicity is not manifestly a bar to holding appointive or elective office at any level of government. As Domhoff puts it, “When it is determined that a minority group has only a small percentage of its members in leadership positions, even though it comprises 10 to 20 percent of the population, then the basic processes of power inclusion and exclusion are inferred to be at work.”²²

Although not included explicitly as one of the analytical boxes in Hechter’s model, residential integration is also an important indicator of a group’s incorporation. Residential segregation sustains a “geography” for ethnic consciousness and solidarity. In particular “the concatenation of residential and occupational segregation gives a decisive advantage to the development of ethnic rather than class solidarity.”²³ Ethnic ghettos, in other words, both create and sustain ethnic consciousness and perhaps

are the most impressive evidence of the lack of incorporation along all three dimensions.

In summing up his model, Hechter advanced three propositions on the prospect for the maintenance of ethnicity. First, the greater the inequalities between groups, the greater the likelihood the disadvantaged group will embrace ethnic solidarity. Second, the greater the frequency of intraethnic relations, the greater the embrace of ethnicity. Third, the greater the differences in culture, real or imagined, the greater the degree of ethnic solidarity. These three propositions are at the same time indicators of the absence of ethnic incorporation, as well as a wish for a degree of autonomy or nationalism on the part of the unincorporated group. These indicators will be of some utility in understanding the ethnic forces shaping the presidential campaigns and presidencies of Kennedy and Obama.

An American Model of Ethnic Incorporation

As indicated, Hechter developed his understanding of ethnicity mainly as a tool to explain the political incorporation of Wales and Scotland into the United Kingdom compared to the path of national independence the Irish pursued. Yet, he was theoretically aware that understanding the situation of the British Isles was related to explaining ethnic change in the United States, especially the failure of African American incorporation.²⁴

In *Who Governs?* the American political scientist Robert Dahl developed a three-stage model to explain specifically the incorporation of ethnic immigrant groups and blacks into the U.S. polity.²⁵ In the first stage, because of the cultural division of labor, the immigrants are disproportionately poor and working class, living in ethnic ghettos. They practice in this stage a ghetto-specific ethnic politics. In the second stage, a sizeable middle class develops, and ethnic solidarity declines, however, it does not disappear because the group as a whole is not incorporated and its middle class “retain[s] a high sensitivity to their ethnic origins.”²⁶ In the third stage, ethnic solidarity withers because the group as whole is fully incorporated with a high degree of socioeconomic differentiation including an upper class as well as a middle class. For the ethnic middle and upper classes, “ethnic politics is often embarrassing” although “a middle-class or upper-class candidate who happens to be from an ethnic group may use this tie to awaken sentiments of pride,”²⁷ but in the main such candidates run “de-ethnicized” campaigns, emphasizing issues of concern to the broad, mainstream electorate.

Based on an analysis of occupations, residence, and voting patterns in New Haven, Connecticut, Dahl estimates that the Irish Catholics, arriving in the 1840s, remained in the first stage for fifty years—until 1880. They remained in stage two for forty years, entering stage three in the 1930s. African Americans in New Haven entered the first stage in 1784, almost sixty years before the Catholic Irish arrived, and they remained in this first stage for more than a century and half before entering the second stage in the 1950s more than twenty years after the Irish Catholics entered the final stage. Thus, the Catholic Irish took ninety years to move from poor, impoverished ghettoized ethnic immigrants to middle-class to upper-class, fully incorporated Americans.²⁸ African Americans, conversely, took 166 years to move from a partly free, partly enslaved (slavery was abolished in Connecticut in 1848), impoverished ethnic group to partial incorporation with an incipient middle class along with a still large, impoverished ghettoized core.

Dahl does not explain the anomaly of the African American situation in New Haven presumably because it was obvious that it “emanated largely from the racist perspective of the American social system.”²⁹ That is, it is the intensity of racism directed toward the black ethnic collectivity compared to the Irish and other European ethnic immigrant groups in New Haven that explains the persistence of their exclusion from the city’s opportunity structure and their persistence as the most ethnic nationalist of the city’s ethnic groups. As the following chapters demonstrate, this pattern of intense exclusionary racism compared to a more benign nativism against Irish Catholics also characterized Boston and Chicago. This differential indeed characterizes the whole of America and constitutes one of the major differences in the history and context in which Kennedy and Obama sought the presidency.

The first Catholic Irish mayor of New Haven was elected in 1899, near the beginning of their entry into the second stage of incorporation. The first African American mayor of New Haven was elected in 1989, almost a half century after blacks entered the second stage of incorporation. Although sensitive to the ties of ethnic origins, John Daniels—the city’s first black mayor—ran a deracialized campaign that appealed to the broad mainstream of New Haven’s electorate.³⁰ With a population only one-third black, he had no choice except to downplay his ethnic ties and interests. However, like U.S. cities elsewhere, New Haven’s core black community is segregated and impoverished with some conditions “reaching Third World proportions.”³¹

When Obama was elected president, African Americans nationally were in the second stage of incorporation, entering it in the late

1960s. When Kennedy was elected in 1960, Irish Catholics were in the third stage nationally, entering it in the 1930s. Understanding the consequences of this on their campaigns and presidencies is the central concern of this book. But first we need to go back to the histories of the Irish Catholic and African peoples in their homelands—and in America, which will help us understand their stages of incorporation.