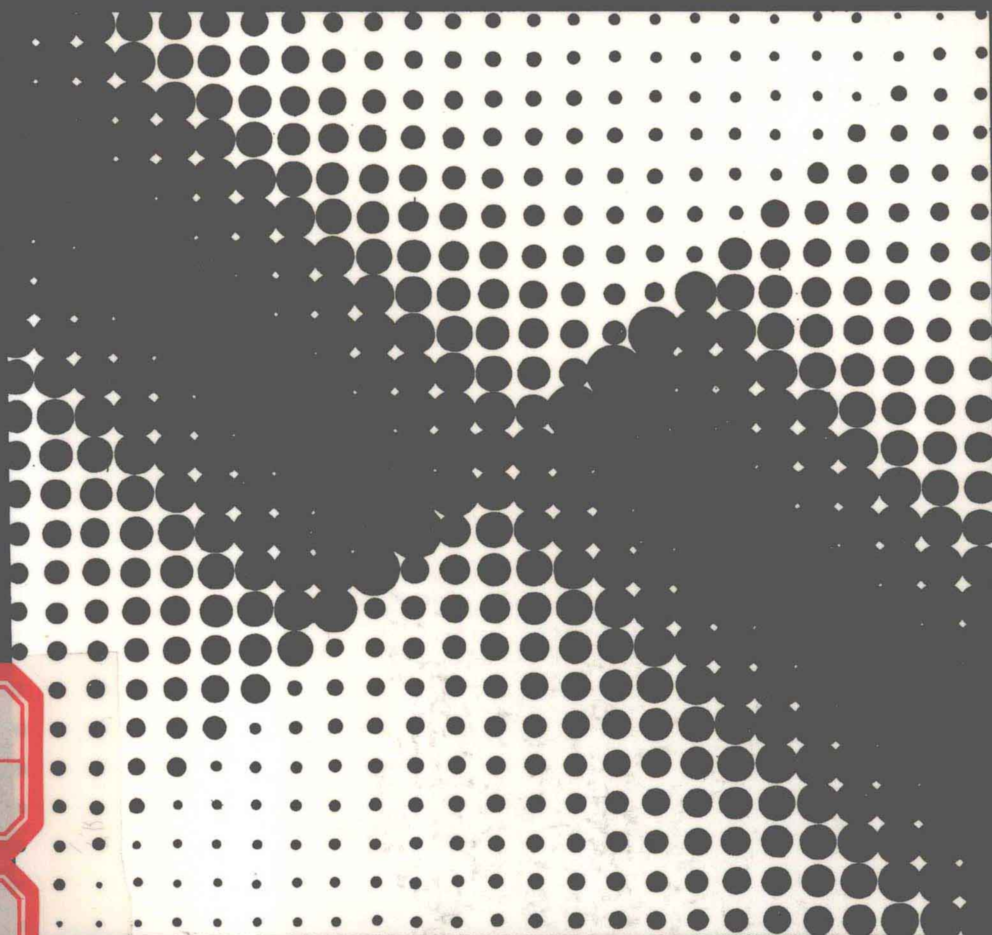
Race-Ethnicity and Society

Benjamin B. Ringer
& Elinor R. Lawless



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Introduction

During the years of President Reagan's administration, racial issues and problems virtually disappeared from the center stage of public discussion and political debate much as they had during the earlier part of the twentieth century.* Most white Americans had come to believe that whatever may have been the nature of these issues and problems historically they were finally resolved by the enactment of the civil rights laws of the 1960s. In fact, even those who resisted passage of these laws in the 1960s adopted this line and with it the rhetoric of the decade as justification for opposing any further remedial action along the racial front. Thus, by the mid-1980s the issue of race had all but vanished from the national agenda. A veneer of tranquility seemed to prevail throughout the society as white America once again asserted its dominance and control over the national agenda and the major institutions of society.

In other words, white Americans had successfully weathered the storm of racial turbulence of the 1960s and the "reverse discrimination" policies of the 1970s which had made them feel and act like the "victims" of government action. In the 1980s they seem more determined than ever to treat these as unpleasant and even ugly accidents or aberrations of history that interrupted the "natural" flow of relations between groups in the American society.

Accordingly, they have dismissed what took place during those years as irrelevant to a better understanding of America's historic relations with its racial minorities. Instead they have sought to return with a vengeance

*The possible exception is the last year of his administration when sustained TV and news media coverage of such events as the Howard Beach trial in New York City once again focused some public attention on the issue of racial discrimination and conflict.

to the status quo ante in their thinking. As such, they have become even more convinced than they were in the early 1960s—just before the deluge—that America is today truly fulfilling the promise of the American creed with its "ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity" (Myrdal 1944:4) to its various ethnic and racial minorities. They are confident that the disparity between the creed's ideals and actual practice about which Myrdal wrote in *An American Dilemma* has finally been eliminated for all and that now it is up to each individual to prove his or her worth.

Most books on race and ethnicity that have been published during this period echo these sentiments. Either they cover those years in a relatively casual manner or treat them as a disruptive, if not destructive, set of historical occurrences. The result has been a trivialization of a watershed set of experiences that in fact challenged the adequacy of the state of knowledge and theory in the field of ethnic and race relations and that raised serious questions about their basic assumptions.

Relatively few scholars, in effect, took advantage of the opportunity offered by this challenge to search for new insights into the study of race relations in America or to reexamine the basic premises in research on these relations.The senior author of this book, Benjamin B. Ringer, undertook such an exploration. During the race riots he soon became convinced that the answers to the fundamental questions raised by them could not be found by merely looking at the present. They were somehow locked into the past. Accordingly, he gave up being a sociologist of the *now* who applied the methodology of survey research to living ethnic actors and became instead a sociologist in history who studied the responses and policies of significant racial actors of America's past. In this manner, he began a voyage of discovery into that past. The odyssey started in the late 1960s and lasted fifteen years. The result was the publication of a monograph that offered a different way of looking at and of conceptualizing what would be better described as the American Paradox than as the American Dilemma. The monograph analyzes in detail how this paradox developed and affected the treatment and life circumstances of specific racial minorities: the blacks, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Puerto Ricans. Its title is *"We the People" and Others: Duality and America's Treatment of its Racial Minorities* (Ringer 1983).

During the course of working on the monograph, it became evident that the manner in which many American social scientists have viewed and continue to view the study of race and ethnic relations in America is too narrowly gauged. It neglects a whole array of dimensions and

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of *they-ness* was virtually monopolized by the social psychologists who concentrated on the dynamics of prejudice: its cognitive, emotional, and conative components. They also looked for the psychological roots of prejudice. They constructed the F-Scale, devised the concept of authoritarian personality, and concluded that the extremely prejudiced person was basically a sick personality.

Others pursued the trail of discriminatory behavior. They enlarged their analytical framework to include cultural and contextual factors, but they too confined their efforts to the individual or at most to relations between individuals in various kinds of social and institutional contexts. And so a theory of equal status contacts was elaborated. The theory maintained that prejudice would be reduced and friendliness enhanced between individuals from different ethnic and racial groups if they were placed in functional relationships in neighborhoods, at work, or in organizations in which they had to interact with each other as equals.

While each approach has contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon, the events of the 1960s have shown the limitation of defining the study of *they-ness* entirely in these terms. It is no longer adequate to treat ethnic and race relations as though they were primarily products of attitude, stereotype, or interpersonal relations within the community or social order.

Accordingly, this book pays much more attention to the study of *they-ness* within the political-economic order of society than to its study within the interpersonal and social orders. Within each order and within the general stratificational system of society, we are particularly interested in the interplay between race-ethnicity and the structures of power and dominance. Thus the perceptions of *they-ness* that concern us most derive from those in positions of power. For the perceptions and beliefs of the dominant ethnic or racial group are most likely to be translated into actions and policies that vitally affect the life chances and circumstances of a given ethnic or racial group.

In the examination of the political-economic order, we avoid the reductionism of orthodox Marxists and modern-day neoconservatives. We do not transmute race and ethnicity into mere derivatives of the workings of the economic marketplace or of class and its relationship to the means of production. Instead we treat race-ethnicity as a distinctive societal phenomenon that has an inner dynamic of its own.

In addition, we do not reduce the political system to a mere "handmaiden" of the economic system as does the orthodox Marxist or perceive the state as a "neutral referee" for the workings of the market system as in the neo-Adam Smith economics of the neo-conservatives. Accordingly, we do not view the fate of ethnic and racial groups as being determined entirely or even primarily by economic and market forces in

contexts. Accordingly to fill the void new concepts had to be constructed, and older ones reconceptualized. These are woven through the text of the monograph.

This book seeks to bring the various strands that are threaded throughout the monograph into a more general—though not necessarily unified—conceptual framework. As such, it is an attempt to conceptualize what has been learned from the earlier work and to make this knowledge available to scholars and to students in the classroom. This book, thus, is to be considered a supplemental text in the field that hopefully fills significant blank spaces.

As a starting point, this book resurrects from the past a concern, all too frequently lost sight of in today's writings, which is the *they-ness* of race and ethnicity. This refers to the way a *given* ethnic or racial group is perceived and defined by other ethnic and racial groups in society. The *they-ness* includes the beliefs, stereotypes, and the like held by these others about a given ethnic or racial group and also the actions and policies that may be directed against this group.

Today the overriding premise for many scholars is that the working of the American creed has become so pervasive and benign that all we need to study are the internal characteristics of groups which either allow them to make it or cause them to be left behind in the competitive struggle for position and privilege. Formerly Jews were the heroes of this approach; today the Japanese are; always in the rear are the blacks.

And so we find a renewed emphasis on the *we-ness* of ethnicity;* how the various kinds of ethnic solidarity and characteristics have helped or hindered groups to overcome the hardships of the past. Accordingly, a deluge of natural histories of specific groups has been written as though these groups were anthropological specimens devoid of a larger societal framework.

Other scholars who are equally enamored with the benign workings of the American creed and who also say the civil rights acts of the 1960s erased racial inequities have followed a different path. For them race has disappeared as an independent variable affecting behavior. Other characteristics of the individual or of his or her position in society have become the determinants of fate.

In focusing on the *they-ness* of race and ethnicity, we do not however go back to the way it was studied in the 1940s and 1950s. Then the study

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*This book does not overlook the significance of the *we-ness* of ethnicity. In fact, in chapter 1 the authors maintain that what makes an ethnic group a distinctive sociological phenomenon is its *we-they* character. They subsequently develop a typology based on the variations in this twofold relationship. The issue therefore is not the *we-ness* of ethnicity but the absence of sufficient attention to its *they-ness* today.

society per se. Instead we follow the lead of Gumplowicz, Cox, Fanon, and others and postulate a direct and crucial linkage between race-ethnicity and political forces and factors in society.

This linkage, we maintain, has operated historically in two different causal directions. First is the imprint of an ethnic or racial group on the formation of a state society. This imprint can be much more readily ascertained in the creation of new political societies such as took place during the five centuries of white European expansion throughout the world. In many of these lands the white Europeans created racially segmented colonial societies through their conquest of native populations. In some of these lands they also became colonists and established permanent settlements for themselves. In the process they constructed a political society whose institutions they molded, as was the case of the English settlers and the Spanish conquistadors in the New World.

Second, the dominant ethnic or racial group once in control of a society—newly created or long established—may promulgate policies and enact legal-normative codes and controls that vitally affect the life chances and circumstances of the various ethnic and racial groups already within the territorial boundaries of the society or newly entering either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Obviously where the political society is newly created the two causal sequences may be inextricably linked and both indelibly impressed on the formation of the new society. What is more the legal-normative codes and controls promulgated by the dominant group need not be one kind of thing for all ethnic and racial groups. Both propositions were demonstrated in *"We the People" and Others* (Ringer 1983). In that work it was shown that a duality was imprinted onto the very legal and political foundations of the American society. This duality came from the twofold processes of colonization and colonialization that were generated by the white Europeans' conquest and settlement of the New World.

As colonists, for example, the English created a society whose institutions were molded in their racial, religious, and national image. They took particular pride in the structure of self-governance that they built, first in Virginia and later in the other colonies. In each, the people of the colonist society had certain basic rights and immunities, but only the white colonists could be part of the people.

As colonialists, the English subjected the nonwhites with whom they came into contact to force and fraud; and they subjugated, killed, or drove them off. The Indians, for example, were overwhelmed by force of arms, deprived of their land and resources, and treated as a conquered subject or inhuman enemy. Blacks were involuntarily brought into the colonies as slaves. By the first decade of the eighteenth century in Virginia, blacks as slaves had been completely dehumanized and

transmuted into pieces of property. They were enmeshed in a web of legal and extralegal coercive constraints and oppressive controls that placed them completely at the mercy of their white masters.

This duality thrived and grew as the thirteen colonies prepared to oppose the rule of the British government, and it survived the successful outcome of the War for Independence and the creation of the new nation. The colonist heritage, for example, found expression in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights as the thirteen colonies were transformed into a federated nation-state, the United States of America. Through this heritage the sovereignty of the people was reaffirmed both in the structures of governance and in the political community.

In contrast, the colonialist heritage found expression in the same kind of structural arrangements that were already in existence. Its racially segmented form and its web of arbitrary legal and political control emerged unscathed with the writing of the Constitution. In fact, it was relegitimized by the Founding Fathers and the First Congress.

In time other racial minorities were caught up in a similar web of arbitrary legal-political control imposed upon them by the dominant white society—a web of control that subjected them to repression and coercion and that enmeshed them in a racial creed of white superiority. Thus, the kind of arbitrary political control that the Founding Fathers had sought to eliminate for the whites in the creation of "We the People" remained for generations as a fact of life for racial minorities. The precise nature of this web of control, however, differed with the individual racial minority. But despite these differences, the basic root for all of these webs was planted in the very foundations of the same society that gave birth to the remarkable people's domain of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

In short, the Founding Fathers sanctified two political models, not one, in the writing of the Constitution and thereby set the stage for what turned out to be in succeeding generations a herculean struggle between the two for the control of the destiny of racial minorities. Thus, it can be maintained that America's historic treatment of its racial minorities has been both an expression and a product of the dialectical tension between these two models.

The duality thesis, then, opens up a whole new approach to the study of race and ethnic relations. It provides us with an alternative way for examining America's treatment of its racial minorities. As such, it challenges three conventional premises in the field. It maintains (1) that treatment of racial minorities in America was qualitatively, not merely quantitatively, different from that experienced by white immigrants; (2) that racism was not a mere aberration in the American society—largely

confined to the South—but was instead built into the very foundations of the American society; and (3) that America's experience with minorities was not unique or found "only in America," but can instead be located within the mainstream of white European expansion, conquest, and settlement as one kind of adaptation of duality. It can accordingly be compared and contrasted with the adaptations of other countries ranging from Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa to those of Latin America.

It would seem, therefore, that the duality thesis has broad applicability as a theoretic and analytic construct even on the international stage. It brings together into a common conceptual framework a variety of historical experiences which share a similar motif. All have been directly or indirectly products of the dual processes of colonization and colonialization generated by the expansion of white Europeans over a span of five centuries.

As we have already indicated, the earliest and most pervasive historical exportation of duality happened during the conquest and settlement of the New World, first by the Spanish, then by the English, and finally by other Europeans. They built their dual societies in South America, Central America, and North America and eventually lost them as these societies became independent nations still bearing the marks of their dualistic heritage.

By the time the white Europeans moved onto the continents of Asia and Africa, they had become, by and large, colonialists who were interested in building an imperial system for their mother country. Accordingly, they constructed only the kind of racially segmented plural society, about which Furnivall [1948] (1956) wrote, with themselves perched at the top as a "sojourner elite." In some places, however, they settled permanently and evolved a colonist society, too. As a result, duality resurfaced in such places as South Africa, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), Australia, and New Zealand.

In Australia and New Zealand the white Europeans overwhelmed an indigenous population that was pushed to the perimeters of the white society as a racial minority, much as the Indian was in the United States. In South Africa and Zimbabwe the situation was different. Whites built their own society as a small minority among a vast population of subjugated nonwhites. As might be expected, the dual structures constructed in these societies reflected the marked variations in population proportions of white and nonwhite as well as the different historical circumstances.

This book, then, brings together a number of different strands that

were explored in the earlier work *"We the People" and Others* (Ringer 1983) and places them into a more general conceptual framework. In the process it seeks to link these strands to the knowledge that had been accumulated in the field, even as it is making a statement for a different approach. This approach would hopefully also provide a general model for the comparative analysis of race and ethnic relations in societies that were products of or influenced by the five centuries of white European expansion.

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1 The "We-They" Character of Race and Ethnicity

A major premise of this book is that ethnic and racial groups are not completely autonomous and self-contained entities. They are, instead, part of a larger societal system that influences, shapes, and particularly in the case of racial groups may even define their very character and determine their life circumstances. As such, these groups are continually beseiged by two sets of dynamic forces, which are frequently in opposition to each other: specifically, an internal set that serves to establish and to maintain the group's distinctive we-ness, and an external set that serves to shape and to designate its they-ness. This dualism was recognized by Peter Rose in his book: *They and We: Racial and Ethnic Relations in the United States* (1981). Shibutani and Kwan also embrace this twoness in their definition of the term: "An ethnic group consists of those who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others" (Shibutani and Kwan 1965:47).

With this dualism in mind, we propose to examine in this chapter first the internal characteristics of an ethnic group, and then shift to a consideration of the role that the larger society plays in delineating the distinctiveness of ethnic and racial groups. Particular attention will be paid to the impact of societal they-ness on the latter.

The Internal Definition of Ethnic Distinctiveness: Its We-ness

A quick glance at the titles of books that have been published in the past several decades would suggest little difficulty in defining what is meant by the term "ethnic group." We have books on Italian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Afro-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, and so on; all concentrate on the ethnic character of these specific groups.

With so many concrete examples of ethnicity, it would seem that the question, "What is an ethnic group?" would be easy to answer by now. And yet, the opposite is true.

Shorn of its denotative and descriptive concreteness, the term takes an elusive, mystical, and frequently romanticized character. This is clearly evident in an early chapter of *Assimilation in American Life* a book that has done much to provide a meaningful conceptual framework for the study of white ethnic groups in America. In the first few pages of the second chapter, the author M. M. Gordon spans much of man's early history. He invokes the Pleistocene hunter, the Zuni, the Arapesh, Assyrians, Jews, Hindus, medieval English, the early Protestants and the like—all in response to the basic question that he raises in his very first paragraph:

> What does a man answer when he is asked, or asks himself, a question as old as the time when some Pleistocene hunter, strayed far from his reassuring campfire and making his way fearfully through the dark tree-dense forest, came upon a stricken man, bested by his quarry, and realized that he had never seen him before—the first stranger? That question is "Who are you?" (Gordon 1964:19).

In graphic words such as these—sometimes lyrical, sometimes mystical—the author pursues the notion of folk as an essential characteristic of the term "ethnic group."

In a similar vein, another author describes the concept "community" which he subsequently applies to the ethnic group. "In the language of Freud, a community can be said to be derived mainly from subconscious experiences, while an association is derived from direct knowledge" (Francis 1947:395).

Examples can be multiplied: all point to the same conclusion. In trying to get at the essence of an ethnic group, many writers allow their rhetoric to soar. Our purpose at this juncture, however, is not to argue with literary style but to emphasize that the concept itself tends to evoke this response. In fact, as we shall see, the act of defining the concept requires coming to terms with the very features that give rise to this rhetoric.

With this caveat in mind, let us attempt to identify the basic internal characteristics and features of an ethnic group. In so doing, we shall on occasion be as guilty as others of exaggerated romanticism and of talking in somewhat mystical terms. But despite these dangers, our purpose is relatively clear: we wish to view the group from the inside and to identify what appears to be its most distinctive features. We shall at first talk as though the ethnic group could be an entity unto itself, but before too long in this chapter we shall correct this notion.

Communal character of the ethnic group

In stressing the centrality of the notion of folk in their definitions of the ethnic group, most authors are seeking to identify its fundamental nature: it is a kind of human community which is deeply rooted in common sentiments, common experience, and a common history. To get the full flavor of what this means, one has but to examine carefully Ferdinand Tönnies's classic concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft.*

To Tönnies, gemeinschaft relations are essentially relations of the heart; they are based on sentiment, courage, and conscience; their virtues are sincerity, kindness, and faithfulness. In contrast, gesellschaft relations are essentially those of the head; they are based on deliberation, calculation, and ambition in which individuals seek to achieve their own ends and purposes. On the group level, according to Tönnies, gesellschaft is best represented by the city, special-purpose associations, the state, and the metropolis in which convention, contract, legislative law, and public opinion provide the bases for order, law, and morality. In contrast, on the group level, the gemeinschaft is governed by understanding, concord, custom, and belief or creed.

He distinguishes three kinds of gemeinschaft: that of blood, of place, and of mind. The gemeinschaft of blood he identifies with kinship and the biological ties that bind human beings into a common genetic pool. The gemeinschaft of place results from the sharing of territory that produces "collective ownership of land." The gemeinschaft of mind is reflected in common values, ideals, and bonds that come to be expressed through sacred beliefs and to be "represented by sacred places and worshipped deities" (Tönnies 1940:48).

So suggestive is Tönnies's treatment of the term *gemeinschaft*, that it provides a conceptual setting in which we can locate the ethnic group. As E. K. Francis says, "If we adopt for the moment Ferdinand Tönnies' typological dichotomy *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, we would have to classify an ethnic group as a rather pure type of *Gemeinschaft*" (Francis 1947:395).

As with Tönnies's trichotomy of blood, place, and mind, so it is possible to trace the basic sources that give rise to the ethnic group, though its precise origins may be lost in the mists of history. First, however, just as Tönnies's concept of gemeinschaft is rooted in the family and kinship system, so are the latter the basic building blocks of the ethnic group. They are the anchor and link to a larger communal system of the present and of the past. And yet the ethnic group is more than a kinship and clan system; historically, it grew out of people who shared territory, sacred belief systems, and biological characteristics.

Gordon considers these shared characteristics as the basic ingredients of

Robert Redfield's "classic model of the 'folk society'" (Gordon 1964:23). In this manner Gordon identifies the folk society as the prototypic community for the ethnic group.

In each of these prototypic communities, then, the three elements of territory, sacred belief system, and biological characteristics reinforced each other to accentuate the distinctiveness of that community in relation to others. This reinforcement was in large measure an expression of the fact that these tribal or folk societies functioned throughout much of man's early history as relatively independent, isolated "political entities" characterized by a relatively homogeneous population, economic self-sufficiency, and what Durkheim called "mechanical solidarity."

In more modern history, the interplay among these three factors becomes more complex. This is particularly true as they relate to ethnic groups in the modern nation-state. Territoriality becomes translated into nationality, sacred belief system into religion, and biological characteristics into race. Each of these factors can and does become the principal organizing basis around which distinctive ethnicity is established. Thus the saliency of the shared characteristic may vary between and among ethnic groups as their defining feature.

And yet it is also possible to describe each group in terms of the other characteristics as well. Gordon does just that when he argues that race, religion, and national origins are the "competing models of ethnicity" in the twentieth-century nation-state. He also adds membership in the nation-state itself as another component of ethnicity.

> The American who answers Who He Is, answers, then, from an ethnic point of view, as follows: I am an American, I am of the White or Negro or Mongoloid race, I am a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, and I have a German or Italian, or Irish, or English, or whatever, national background. In practice, it is probable that these discrete categories are attached to the self not separately or serially but in combination (Gordon 1964:26).

However, when Gordon shifts to a discussion of "our conventional language of ethnic identification within the nation," he omits being an American as part of this identification.

> This American is a white Protestant Anglo-Saxon; that one is an Irish Catholic (white race understood), this one a Negro Protestant (African background understood), that one is a Russian Jew (white race understood). This is the way we identify each other and ourselves when we think, ethnically, about Who We Are within the national boundaries (Gordon 1964:26).

For Gordon, then, race, religion, and national origins constitute the "conventional language of ethnic identification within the nation." We

agree with this usage. But we would go a step further and say that these are the only defining features of ethnicity that he has to offer. For ethnicity, as he himself suggests, focuses on group differences within the political and territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Small wonder that he does not mention present membership in a nation-state as part of the person's ethnic identification. We are accordingly puzzled over his rationale for including it in his earlier, more general statement on ethnicity. We shall have much more to say on this issue later.

The role of the past

Another distinctive feature of the ethnic group is that it has a history. This not only gives the group a common ancestry and descent but also becomes a significant basis for organizing the present. The temporal dimension obviously accentuates the role of the family as a major link between the present and the past. As such, membership in the ethnic group is primarily a function of birth—a matter of ascription rather than of voluntary choice.

And yet despite the importance of the temporal dimension, the factual origins of the group are frequently shrouded in mystery. It is extremely difficult to trace the causative unfolding of common ancestry for the contemporary character of the ethnic group. Much more significant is the function that the presumed ancestry plays in maintaining the present for the group. It underlies the central collective representations, core myths, and belief systems that serve to provide cohesion for the present. Francis argues that "the real racial composition" and actual history of a group are less important than are its assumed common descent and beliefs about the history. "The device of myths to establish a common ancestry for an ethnic group is a very ancient one. At all times man seems to have tampered with the mystery of biological heredity" (Francis 1947: 396).

These myths and belief systems in connecting the present with the past not only insure the continuity of the group but also make the past a living and vital part of the present. In the process, the tendency is to emphasize the perceived presumed heroic nature of this past; the accuracy of these memories is less important than the memories themselves.

> For a person who identifies with an ethnic category, its history provides a backdrop before which to review his own conduct. The history of any group consists of those collective memories shared by its members of the glorious deeds of their forebears, of their unfair persecution, and of the decisive events that resulted in its present situation. This historical past often includes fictitious accounts, but the way in which the history of a group is remembered is far more important than what it has actually been. Those who identify can

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