

Ethnicity and Generation

On “Feeling Irish” in Contemporary America

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This contribution explores the ethnic identity of the contemporary descendants of Irish immigrants who came to America between 1847 and 1854, during and after the Great Famine, who are now of the fifth and sixth generation. Most first-generation Irish-born immigrants were English-speakers, who freely intermarried with other English-speaking immigrants from England, Wales and Scotland, and second-generation Americans whose parents were from other European countries. Generation upon generation of subsequent intermarriage has resulted in individuals with very mixed ancestries. As people have become hybridised through intermarriage, their categorical identities in a society in which everyone is nonetheless assumed to have a distinct ethnic or categorical identity have become increasingly uncertain and ambiguous. For a large number of Americans whose ancestry is complicated or indeterminate, “ethnic identity” is an empty vessel, which can be filled (or not, as the individual wishes) with whatever content he or she likes. In those situations, ironically now more frequent than in the past, when individuals are called upon to state or perform “an ethnic identity,” their choices range from the strategic and situational, to the arbitrary and capricious. This contribution thus raises questions about the limits, and future, of concepts such as “roots” and “ethnicity” in polyethnic and multicultural societies where free intermarriage across categorical boundaries over the generations blurs and ultimately dissolves such boundaries.

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In an increasingly multicultural world, the concepts of “ethnicity” and “identity” have become evermore prominent in the discourse of our disciplines. These terms are now so common that they are often used without much reflection. Their applicability to the kinds of ethnological materials we analyse is sometimes merely asserted, without much attempt to validate or justify the appropriateness of their use, or to examine their methodological and political consequences. This paper presents a test-case which reveals the limits of these concepts. It explores the dynamics of ethnicity and identity among the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-generation descendants of mid-nineteenth century immigrants from Ireland to America. Contemporary Americans of Irish ancestry, as “Irish-Americans”, are conventionally said to be an “ethnic group”, from which individuals are held to derive their “iden-

ties”. This paper questions these ideas, and probes the boundaries of their applicability.

I

I take as my point of departure an observation made by the American sociologist Herbert Gans in 1979, that as the generations have passed since their immigrant ancestors arrived in America, the ethnic identities of their descendants have been transformed by the nature of the social milieux which have nourished their expression (Gans 1979). As assimilation and intermarriage have proceeded over the generations, the hard edges of ethnicity have gradually worn away. While people may still be identified as ethnics by others on the basis of their surnames or physical appearance, the everyday lived experience that once went with being

ethnic has largely disappeared, allowing individuals the latitude to decide when, how, and in what degree – if at all – to express their attachment to their ancestry. As the pedigrees of individuals have become mixed and complicated through intermarriage with people of other ancestral backgrounds, their ethnic identity has become increasingly indeterminate. The boundaries of belonging overlap, lose their definition, and melt away. Identity with one's ancestral origins becomes optional, a matter of personal inclination and interpretation.

For the later-generation descendants of European immigrants, Gans's hypothesis has been largely borne out by subsequent research. The American sociologists Richard Alba, Stanley Lieberson, and Mary Waters have shown that in terms of concrete social action, if not also in the ways that people think of themselves, distinctive differences associated with their old-country origins have dimmed and disappeared in everyday social experience as the generations have passed. It is now clear that what constitutes a sense of ethnic identity among these Americans varies greatly in quality and quantity from one individual to another. Moreover, free intermarriage across ancestral lines over the generations has had the result that most people of European origin are nowadays of mixed descent: *which* of their European origins they might identify with, if any, the analyst cannot presume to know in advance. Thus neither the social distribution nor the cultural contents of ethnicity can any longer be taken for granted (if, indeed, these things could ever have been taken for granted), but must be established empirically.

In the same paper, Gans noted that ethnicity is determined not only by what goes on among the ethnics, but also by developments in the larger society, a remark which echoed the point made by Max Weber in 1921, that the appearance and persistence of ethnic identification is related to its political context (Weber: *Economy and Society*, Vol. I, 389–95). Until the 1970s, the prevailing political ideology in America was that of the Melting Pot: immigrants' children were officially described as native-born Americans who were expected to have largely cast off their parents' old-country loyalties, and it was

widely assumed that by the third generation their grandchildren would be completely assimilated, unethnic Americans. For millions of people of European origin, this was not merely a political ideology buttressed by a scholarly theory (that of "straight-line" assimilation): it was a moral project, a fundamental civic value of Americanness in which they were brought up to believe. Over the generations, they strove to make their children the same as their neighbours' children: unethnic, unhyphenated, unlabelled, and undifferent. That a high degree of assimilation was largely achieved, at least for the later-generation descendants of people of European origin if not for other Americans, is broadly supported by the findings of recent sociological research. Yet, paradoxically, as the lived-and-felt experience of ethnicity has been transformed by generational distance and complicated by intermarriage, a new political arena – that of multiculturalism – has emerged since the 1970s. New *ethnies* have been created, and moribund ones revitalized and reinvented just at a moment in American history when they had all but vanished for the descendants of mid-nineteenth century European immigrants. As it has come to be widely accepted – so gradually that the truly profound nature of this ideological shift has perhaps received less recognition than it ought – that everyone in America should now have "an ethnic identity" and that every newly-invented or reinvented *ethnie* should be furnished with "a culture" and "a history", Weber's observation now seems more applicable to American society than ever before: *ethnies* are not to be understood as things-in-themselves, but only in relation to the other *ethnies* by which they are defined. An exploration of contemporary Irish-Americanness, then, necessarily raises questions about the societal circumstances in which ideas of Irishness have been created and re-created.

Irish-Americanness today is an amalgam of images drawn from Irish and American history and popular culture, the product of two worlds in two centuries: Irish nation-building in the old world in the nineteenth century, and American pluralism and multiculturalism in the new world in the twentieth century. Interpretations of the past have merged into the present and

have come to colour our understandings of social memory, self-image, and ethnic identity among the current generations of Americans who are descended from Irish immigrant ancestors. Most Irish emigrants left their native country and came to America at a time of intense political turmoil. Nineteenth-century nation-building in Ireland generated a great deal of passion about the qualities of "true" Irishness. The temptation to use these morally-charged ideas to explain the nature of emigration and the character of Irish emigrants to America, and to interpret the ethnic identity of their descendants, has proved irresistible to scholars and popular writers on the Irish in America. These images influence what research is done, where it is done, and how it is done. Few writers on the Irish in America have looked beyond the nineteenth-century ethnic enclaves of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, or Chicago, or have asked how the notion of an Irish-American ethnic identity in contemporary America can be reconciled with four, five, or six generations of intermarriage and assimilation over the last century and a half.

II

The Great Famine in Ireland provoked a huge surge in emigration to America between 1847 and 1854, and then reverted to its pre-Famine level. Twenty percent of all nineteenth-century Irish emigrants to America arrived during those seven fateful years. Five generations have passed since then. Their descendants are now thoroughly assimilated Americans. In their everyday private lives, few traces remain of their Irish immigrant great-great-grandparentage. For most, and for ninety percent of the fifth generation (born 1945–1974), their connections with the Famine refugees of the mid-nineteenth century have become increasingly distant and uncertain, as their own and previous generations married people of other European ancestries, and as they married the descendants of Irish immigrants who had arrived in America before 1847 or after 1854. Many of our informants had lost touch, through their genealogical knowledge, with that fateful moment in history a century and a half ago; and how, if at all, they

were connected to it. Two-thirds had an incomplete knowledge of the basic details of their grandparents' biographies which took them back to the beginning of the twentieth century or the end of the nineteenth, and fewer still were able to account for their great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents a half-century earlier, knowing when their Irish ancestors left the old country, and why.

Until recently, this kind of backward-looking knowledge was clearly unimportant to most people. The previous generations were not especially interested in where their ancestors had come from, or when, but rather in making lives for themselves and investing in the future through their children. There was nothing to be gained by looking back, and there was no practical use to which such knowledge could be put. Nonetheless, most of our informants were conscious of being of Irish ancestry, and there were occasions when they still felt Irish, displayed their Irishness, and did self-consciously Irish things even if this was only to wear something green on St Patrick's Day. Much of this was related to the particular social milieu of the place where we did our fieldwork – Albany, New York – where being of Irish descent and being a Catholic are so common that they are firmly tied together in the popular imagination. While the conjuncture of these two things, along with being a Democrat, is the consequence of historical circumstance, the ideas people had about themselves were not necessarily backward-looking, and usually were not. For the majority of our informants, it was enough to know that being of Irish ancestry made one normal, like most other people, a part of the fully-assimilated, old-stock European majority in Albany society, and signified little more than this: it was a claim to unethnic Americanness rather than ethnic Irishness.

Until the 1924 Immigration Act required the census bureau and the immigration service to set quotas related to the American population as it was then constituted, little effort had been made to determine the ancestral composition of the American population. No question on place of birth was asked until the census of 1850. The second generation, whatever their parents' origins, were merely recorded as native-born until

1880, when they were asked whether they had foreign-born parents and if so where they had been born. No question would be asked about the grandparentage of the third generation until 1980, by which time the older-stock ancestries who had arrived by 1850 were already into the fourth or fifth generation and beyond. And, no question on religion was ever asked, or would be asked in a U. S. Census. When, in 1927, the American Council of Learned Societies was commissioned to prepare a report on the ancestral composition of the U. S. population, it was required to differentiate within the immigrant flow from Ireland: to distinguish between those thought to have come from Leinster, Munster and Connaught, and those thought to have come from Ulster, in order to set an immigration quota for the newly-established Irish Free State. The Irish population was divided into three quasi-racial categories: the "Celtic-Irish" (Catholics), who were presumed to predominate in the south, and the "Anglo-Irish" and "Scots-Irish" (Protestants), who were presumed to predominate in the north. There being no direct evidence about the religion of the emigrants from Ireland who had already settled in the United States, the ACLS had used indirect evidence; but in order to determine how to proceed, it had to have a working definition of what we would nowadays call "ethnicity". The ACLS used the notion of "national character", commonplace at the time, which did not distinguish between race and culture, but treated loyalty to faith and custom as facts of nature inherent in bonds of blood and descent from common origins, as if they were inherited traits of the same order as skin colour or hair texture. In accepting the report, the American federal authorities thus endorsed as authoritative a definition of "ethnicity" based upon primordialism – that membership of an ethnic community is the consequence of the facts of birth – and in so doing entered the arena of modern American ethnic politics extraordinarily ill-equipped to perceive its sociological realities.¹

The civil rights debates of the 1950s and 1960s, since they eventually became reduced to skin colour – an inherited physical trait – as the defining characteristic of those suffering the most grievous political disadvantage and social

and economic alienation from the American Dream, was so easily accommodated within the primordialist interpretation of ethnicity already accepted by the federal authorities that it appeared to confirm its validity as a general principle and to justify its extension into other realms of American life. The essentializing idea that ethnicity is unambiguously and unalterably fixed by ancestry eventually came to underpin official policies on multiculturalism and equal opportunities. Thus one can read in a contemporary American manual on hiring practices:

"For the purposes of this discussion we will define *primary dimensions of diversity* as those immutable human differences that are inborn and/or that exert an important impact on our early socialization and an ongoing impact throughout our lives. ... Listed in alphabetical order, they are: (1) Age. (2) Ethnicity. (3) Gender. (4) Physical abilities/qualities. (5) Race. (6) Sexual/affectional orientation" (Loden and Rosener 1991, quoted in Verdery 1996: 53).

It is an astonishing reversal of ideology that the country which regarded itself a melting pot, and which for generations encouraged its citizens to discard their attachments to their foreign origins and to become unethnic Americans, now expects its citizens to belong, at least nominally, to a set of officially-defined, primordial, quasi-racial *ethnies*. Nowadays, in the interests of even-handed, egalitarian multiculturalism, American school teachers not uncommonly ask children to say what they "are" (not merely to say what their immigrant ancestors' origins were, a century ago), forcing them to identify with an *ethnie*, no matter how irrelevant such a question might be to the child's circumstances or complicated or indeterminate their ancestry. Teachers rely on manuals and textbooks to tell the children about "their traditions" and "their history" which they are presumed to have inherited along with their surnames, skin and hair colour, books which are authorized for use in publicly-funded classrooms by state legislatures and local school boards. These interpretations of "culture", and "history" are, then, subject to political definition and surveillance.

Contemporary ethnic politics has had the

effect, intended or not, of creating cleavages and deepening differences in the American social fabric. New *ethnies* have been defined which would have been scarcely recognizable to the ancestors of most present-day generations of Americans, since more often than not they are based on boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that are not congruent with those which had significance to the first generations of immigrants to America, one, two, or three centuries ago; and in any event for a large part of the European-ancestry population have become obscured and all but erased by subsequent generations of intermarriage. Once the boundaries encompassing these new *ethnies* came to be defined by the continent, region, or the modern nation-state encompassing the place of one's ancestors' birth, the void thus created within these boundaries demanded to be filled with cultural stuff; with moral content; with stories.

"Multiculturalism tends to become a form of identity politics, in which the concept of culture becomes merged with that of ethnic identity. From an anthropological standpoint, this move, at least in its more simplistic ideological forms, is fraught with dangers both theoretical and practical. It risks essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race; it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing their boundedness and mutual distinctness; it risks overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimate repressive demands for communal conformity" (Turner, "Anthropology and Multiculturalism: What is Anthropology That Multiculturalists Should Be Mindful of It?" 1993, quoted in Baumann 1996: 20).

There is another risk: the politics of multiculturalism encourages competition between *ethnies*: in practice, as the game has been played, those who can sustain their claims to have endured the most suffering and injustice by presenting the most persuasive stories through their ethnic advocates have won the contests for recognition and special treatment. The success of some claims has not been lost on all those other players seeking to advance their interests or even just to avoid losing ground relative to

the rest. There are points to be scored for being a wronged and exploited minority, but none for being part of the lace-curtain majority. Political expediency thus influences what stories come to fill the space within the ethnic boundaries.

Five generations is a long time, long enough for many of our informants to have lost touch with distantly-removed branches of their families in the United States, much less with even more distant relatives in Ireland, if any still remain. For most people, a knowledge of who their Irish ancestors were, where they lived, whether they were the landless poor from the rocky Atlantic shores of Donegal or Mayo or the middle ranks of the yeomanry from the rich fields and pastures of Down or Wexford; whether they were Famine refugees escaping poverty and pestilence; or whether they were surplus daughters their fathers were shipping off to New York to avoid paying a dowry or the social embarrassment of a "wrong" marriage, or sons impatient with the prospect of remaining unmarried and having to work as unpaid farm hands until their forties or fifties when their fathers chose to retire and hand over the house and farm; or whether they were simply seeking the promise of the American Dream like so many other European immigrants of the time, is knowledge which is now lost to their descendants. Our informants' understandings of the past may or may not have had much relationship to the stories their ancestors might have told. These understandings varied from one informant to the next; they were a jumble of the particular and the general, of fragments of actual events in Irish history and the nation-building rhetoric of the nineteenth century, together with ideas drawn from panegyric popular histories, fiction, film, television, school-room projects, museum displays, and theme days. Contemporary public debate about multiculturalism in North America has given a great deal of impetus to the creation and revitalization of folk images and scholarly interpretations of Irishness: and especially to certain kinds of images and interpretations.

For people of Irish ancestry, simply being an American and climbing the ladder of success, that which their great-grandparents strove for and achieved by putting a stony, no-hope farm

in County Clare behind them, is today no longer enough, it seems. Since the 1970s, with public debates about multiculturalism, everyone has come to be regarded as needing “an ethnic identity”. Compared with previous generations, consciousness of ancestry has become heightened and people have been led to take an interest in their ethnic heritage: the cultural stuff of being Irish. As a consequence of this awakening of interest, as well as the creation of demand through its own dynamics, an entire industry has developed which supplies a surfeit of ready-made, off-the-shelf stories and pictures of the past, amongst which the consumer may browse, that satisfy the curiosity that anyone of Irish ancestry might have about the immigrant experience, about what happened in Ireland, and about Irish traditions. Like written-to-a-formula airport novels, some of these stories sell rather better than others. Those which contrive to pluck at the emotional heartstrings are always among the best-sellers.

The cultural space newly authorized by multiculturalism was quickly filled. The materials already existed to transform Irish ancestry into Irish ethnicity. A useful, if dated, model of ethnic Irishness was close at hand, and so was its cultural stuff. The waves of religious, linguistic, economic, and political transformation reached Ireland in her island fastness on the western edge of Europe after they had swept across the rest of the continent, arriving late enough that the traumas of modernization were entering their most painful and politically-difficult phase when a new idea, that of the nation, appeared in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. The notion of Celticness, a racial metaphor, came to embody the sectarian division of Ireland into those who saw themselves as the natural inheritors of her history, religion, and native traditions, and those who were seen as invaders and despoilers. The idea of an Irish *ethnie*, based upon primordial attachments, had been forged in the crucible of Irish nationalism by more than a hundred years of political persuasion and intellectual industry.

The battle for Irish independence was won in 1920; a half-century later, these ideas were beginning to gather dust when the need for a primordial Irish *ethnie*, pictured as a wronged

and exploited underclass, arose again in the United States in the 1970s. The sectarian, nineteenth-century nation-building image of the Irish as Celts, Catholics, and children of the Famine was resurrected as the definition of “true” Irishness, and its stories, written for a particular political purpose in another country in another century, were likewise dusted off and supplemented by home-grown tales of the hardships and homesickness of the first generation of Irish Catholic immigrants in America’s big-city enclaves. In much the same way that ethnic advocates have found that pleading past suffering and injustice wins political points, heritage-industry entrepreneurs have discovered that adversity and tragedy, like romance, is a winning formula for selling stories to a public presumed to be hungry for knowledge of who they are in this multicultural world, a world in which everyone must now have “a history”, “a culture” and “an ethnic identity”, however and by whomever contrived, from whatever motives.

“The Great Famine is arguably the only event in modern Irish history to have achieved widespread international recognition. The steady sales of Cecil Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger*, which has been in print for more than thirty years, testify to a continuing wish to be informed about this crisis. The more recent runaway success of the spurious *Famine Diary* – allegedly the diary of school teacher Gerald Keegan who emigrated with his wife to Canada on a “coffinship” where both died of fever – and its continuing sales despite being revealed as a piece of late nineteenth-century Canadian-Irish fiction – suggest a strong desire to wallow in its emotional horrors, perhaps at the cost of a wider understanding. For some U. S. and Canadian citizens of Irish descent the Famine is in danger of becoming their answer to the Jewish Holocaust: evidence that the Irish too are a nation of victims, a causal explanation for mass emigration and a symbol of national unity. With the sesquicentennial of the Famine in 1995 and the promises of Famine walks, Famine museums and the commemoration of Famine-era graveyards the Famine seems set to become a part of the Irish heritage industry” (Daly 1996: 71).

That ten percent of Ireland's population was lost in the fearful and fateful calamity of the Famine which it was the misfortune of Ireland to bear with such severity, and that some Irish immigrants to America were maltreated just as the Italians and Poles who followed them were maltreated by earlier arrivals in America, are facts that are beyond question. But it is equally indisputable that ninety percent survived the Famine, and that most of those who came to America as wholly unremarkable economic migrants – who were eighty percent of the immigrant flow from Ireland to America in the nineteenth century² – found what they were looking for, succeeded as well as any, made more rapid gains than non-English speakers arriving at the same time from Germany, Italy, Poland, and elsewhere, and over the generations have merged completely into the lace-curtain American ascendancy.

Nonetheless, as the event that is popularly believed to have caused the Irish diaspora, the anthropomorphic interpretation of the Great Famine – the tale of a cruel and calculating tyrant (Britannia) and an innocent and pitiable victim (Erin), a story which embellishes historical contingency and transforms impersonal, unintended, and unconnected occurrences into a seamless moral epic – has assumed mythic status and now informs most people's understandings of the immigrant experience. Like other myths, its relationship to history and social organization is problematic: it is only partly related to reality. It is an allegory that invites us to consider how something that does not exist except as a nominal abstraction and might never have existed in the other America beyond the first-generation immigrant ghetto – an Irish-American *ethnie* – can be represented in our imagination. It is a means by which we can begin to understand how people whose repertoire of social practices from one year to the next is, in their own estimations, in no way Irish, who are several generations removed from anyone who ever lived in Ireland, and whose genealogies might reveal them to be mostly German or English, can nonetheless feel the emotional tug of being Irish for an hour, a day, or a lifetime. That the arresting imagery of this picture is the very opposite of social and

historical reality, and stands in a dialectical relationship to it, adds to its power to command our attention.

It is conventional, but probably an anthropological conceit, to say that everyone needs myths. It may be that people need ideals, things to believe in, and stories about the worlds they inhabit that provide more-or-less satisfying explanations, but these do not necessarily have to be culturally-specific parables which reach back into the past. Our informants' parents and grandparents looked to the future, to the day their children and grandchildren attained the American Dream. The dream may have turned to dust for some Americans, but for millions of descendants of European immigrants there was suburban middle-class respectability at the end of the rainbow and the Melting Pot was, and is, most certainly *not* a myth but the everyday moral project of past and current generations. Multiculturalism has brought about a new kind of project and has opened up a burgeoning market in politicized and manufactured heritage: both have produced essentializing myths. In place of the variety of views of the world as their ancestors actually experienced it, as it was related to their time, place, and individual social circumstances, we now have "a diasporic culture": mass-produced, standardized, pre-packaged, one-size-fits-all.

III

It is ironic that as Irishness has dimmed and disappeared in everyday social practice, it should now be reinvented as "social memory", "shared identity", and "collective self-image". Tradition needs to be preserved in a condition of post-traditionality, or it fades away. As the traditions of the old country are no longer nourished in Irish-American families, they no longer have a life of their own except through their inscription in best-selling stories and their embodiment in museum displays and theme days. Most of the people we interviewed knew something about Ireland and Irishness, and a very large proportion of our informants had made visits to their ancestors' homeland. But the evidence of a shared social memory of the immigrant experience in our informants' accounts,

as something that binds them together as a collectivity, is exceedingly equivocal, and raises searching methodological questions about what counts as social memory or self-image and how one establishes that these things are shared to the extent that one can speak of them as “collective”. There was wide variation among our informants in their accounts of their Irishness. Their accounts were differently structured; some derived from personal experience, others from the experiences of other people they knew, still others from abstractions and beliefs not rooted in the experience of anyone whom they knew but were nonetheless taken to be evidence of something significant, real, and true. Much the same can be said of their social practices. How is such wide variation to be regarded as evidence of “a shared culture”? Or as informing “the ethnic identity” of individuals? One suspects that it is simply because, as the storytellers, we say so. We have taken it as our task to discover what lies within the space bounded by the idea of “Irish-American ethnicity”. But if we do not question the legitimacy of the category by critically examining the nature of its boundaries, how they have been defined, by whom and for what purpose, and what happens at the boundary-zone and beyond, we merely create that which we are looking for as a consequence of our scholarly practice.

Only a handful of our informants were sufficiently interested in their ancestry or ethnicity that one might have said that their “identity” as Irish-Americans had some everyday importance to them. The assumption that everyone is interested in their ethnic identity, or that despite the strident demands of multiculturalism that they have the wish, or the means, to assign themselves to a single *ethnie* is not unambiguously borne out by our findings in Albany. That we were a research team from Ireland interested in their Irish connections and their sense of Irishness undoubtedly influenced what our informants told us. There is no reason to think that someone half Irish and half German might not have said very different things had we been a research team from Germany.

What is now understood to be Irish-American ethnicity is a creolization of Irish and American history and popular culture produced in

the rough and tumble of American pluralism and multiculturalism, and has probably taken different twists and turns in different places across the country over the last century and a half. We are now in danger of losing all this richness of variety as understandings about “Irish ethnicity” and “diasporic culture” or “the immigrant experience” settle into rigid, iconic shapes which canalize and constrain the way that Irish-Americanness is represented, authorizing – even sacralizing – some ideas and interpretations and condemning others as “revisionism”. The commonplace, increasingly standardized and essentialized stereotypes of Irishness held by Americans, including their interpretations of the Famine, have been exported across the Atlantic along with bagels and baseball, and are now re-packaged and sold back to Americans as “heritage” when they visit Ireland. Providing for American and Canadian tourists is one of Ireland’s biggest and most important industries and sources of dollar revenue. Nothing is left to chance: the national tourist board and private entrepreneurs in Ireland do market research and know what North Americans want to see and hear, which stories and pictures are acceptable and saleable and which are not; a brief package tour of Ireland is therefore much less likely to disturb North American preconceptions than to reinforce them.

Although Albany is as Irish a place as one might expect to find outside the big-city enclaves of New York City, Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, in many respects it is less markedly Irish than one might have anticipated from the way Irish-Americanness is portrayed in much of the scholarly literature. Our analysis emphasized the middle of the spectrum of Irish-Americanness at the expense of the extremes. A view of Irishness from the vantage point of Murphy’s Tavern or the folk music scene, as seen through the eyes of people who were especially conscious of their Irishness and were involved in Irish-American affairs, would have been very different. Had we limited our horizons in this way, it would not have been difficult to have sustained a plausible argument that Irishness was undimmed by a century and a half of social change, though its contemporary manifestations might perhaps have taken dif-

ferent forms. But the world of the self-conscious Irishness of the few would not have been the world of the many: the other ninety percent of Albany's residents, who have an equal – or even stronger – claim upon descent from the Famine refugees, but who soon left their Irishness behind as they began to succeed in climbing the ladder of the American Dream, never to look back.

Nonetheless, a semblance of Irish ethnicity will be kept alive by the demand which multiculturalism imposes, that every American ought really to be something else that is more primordial – unrealistic and artificial as this may be in the case of later-generation Americans of complex ancestries. After the passage of five or six generations of assimilation and intermarriage, Irishness, for most, is already a virtual ethnicity, no longer a lived reality: a composed and constructed one consisting of a contrived categorical boundary containing idiosyncratic individual collections of bits and pieces, highly variable in provenance, quality, and quantity. Like a reversible T-shirt saying “Irish for a Day” on one side and “Kuss mich, ich bin Schwabe” on the other that one can keep in a bottom drawer, and put on when the mood takes one, or as the occasion warrants, such manifestations of ethnicity are not very demanding to maintain, take up very little space in one's wardrobe, and might still come in useful now and again.

IV

As our view of the world becomes increasingly informed by ideas about multiculturalism, the boundaries of belonging which define the objects of our attention – *ethnies*, and the identities that are said to flow from them – are melting away before our eyes as a consequence of globalizing and creolizing processes, and the gradual assimilation through acculturation and intermarriage of post-War immigrant streams in Europe, as elsewhere in the world. This is as it should be: what we value about multiculturalism as a moral project, surely, is that people ought to live together in conditions which engender harmony and tolerance and reduce the barriers to communication and understanding.

The point which has been developed in this

paper is that these are exactly the same conditions that tend to dissolve ethnic boundaries, promote intermarriage, and over the generations produce individuals like our Americans of Irish ancestry, who are no longer “ethnic” by any rigorous methodological criterion. This should provoke us to recognize that, as ethnologists and anthropologists, we have a certain compulsion to focus on those things that make one group of people distinct from others, and to attribute commensality and a collective identity to that group; indeed, we may feel we have failed to do our job properly if we cannot adduce exemplary evidence of a distinctive “ethnic culture” among that group. Yet, by emphasizing distinctiveness, we are complicit in creating social divisions and in erecting or re-erecting cultural salients that, but for our intervention, might never have been given public recognition, or might have quietly disappeared in everyday life. Our scholarly practice may carry beyond the walls of academe to play into the hands of those who would plunder our writings for scientifically-respectable evidence which can be used to legitimate their political projects. Their projects may be for good or evil; they may foster intercommunal harmony or, equally, intercommunal hatreds: we cannot know. All we can be certain of is that we ignore, at our peril, questions about the boundary: how, why, and by whom the boundary has been defined. What actually happens at the boundary will reveal the extent it is wished for, imagined, real, or was once real but is no longer so. As with the Irish-Americans, some of these putative ethnic boundaries may turn out, on closer inspection, not to be very significant or not to exist at all for the majority of the people to whom “an ethnic identity” is attributed.

Notes

1. Cf. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 234–54; A. D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, 30–34; E. Roosens, “The Primordial Nature of Origins in Migrant Ethnicity”, 83–84; R. Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, chs. 6, 10; A. P. Cohen, “Boundaries of Consciousness, Consciousness of Boundaries”, 65. See also J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, *Ethnicity*; B. Anderson, *Imagined*

Communities; and E. Gellner, Nations and Nationalism.

2. According to Blessing's figures, 3,785,222 immigrants from Ireland arrived in the United States from 1820 through 1899. Those arriving during the Famine and its immediate aftermath, from 1847 through 1854, totalled 1,186,928. One must, however subtract from this the number of immigrants who might reasonably have been expected to arrive had it not been for the Famine. This is estimated at 50,000 per year, which was the level seen immediately before the Famine, and which followed from 1855 onward. See P. J. Blessing, *The Irish in America*, 289.

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