

FLC 301/Fall 2001

Instructor: H. Kurthen

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Global Ethnicity and Race in U.S. Perspective

by

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1. Briefing (Team #5)

The class discussion focused on Kymlicka's article about how ethnoracial minorities should be accommodated to avoid conflict and provide their integration under the roof of liberal democracy. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, its defeat and dismemberment into multiethnic states at the end of WWI, and the ensuing minority conflicts that contributed to WWII, was used as an example to demonstrate how policies failed in the past. Even sincere efforts by the League of Nations (a predecessor of the UN) were unable to remedy ethnic conflicts that resulted from unequal peace treaties in 1919 that drew poorly thought out borders unrepresentative and irrespective of the populations inside.

The situation in multiethnic immigration societies, like the U.S., is different, however, since migrants arrive voluntarily and are expected to integrate into a given socioeconomic and political entity. Nevertheless it seems to be necessary in democratic societies to grant cultural space, rights, and tolerance to those who identify with different ethnoracial groups and want to maintain group characteristics. Liberal multiculturalism can work as long as everybody accepts common constitutional and human rights and does not discriminate others on ascriptive grounds.

In the next step our class went over the reading by Kelleher/Klein and discussed why cultural beliefs are so powerful, how we should define "culture," what types of historical cultures do exist, and what classifications are useful to understand subcultural differences by race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Finally, we talked about common reactions to societal diversity and weighted the example of Nunavut in Canada.

2. Guest Lecture

Professor Sellers focused in his presentation on three issues related to his research: (a) the increase of ethnoracial diversity in the U.S. as a result of recent immigration; (b) increased air travel mobility allowing for the widening of horizons and global exchange; and (c) the rise of ethnic consciousness. We first learned more about the successive historical waves of immigration to North America and their ethnoracial makeup: first the arrival of American Indians, next the coming of European explorers and later colonists (Vikings, Spanish, British, French, Dutch, Swedes), followed by 19th century mass immigration by the Irish, Germans, East Europeans etc. The restrictions on immigration put into law by the American government in 1924 was racially motivated since it promoted only the arrival of Western and Northern Europeans. Only in 1965 immigration laws were loosened and limits were set on the Western Hemisphere. Soon after that Asians, Latin Americans, Indians, Arabs and others started immigrating in larger numbers.

At the example of Long Island's airline industry we learned more about how New York/Long Island became a major transport hub in global air travel and a center of founding events in the aviation industry. The Hempstead Plains was one of the earliest airfields. Charles Lindbergh took off from Farmingdale on his now infamous first flight to Europe in

1927. The first commercial transatlantic flight took place in 1935. In 1940 La Guardia airport opened, built by money from Roosevelt's "New Deal." LGA was the first public airport in the U.S. As a result of the Federal Aviation Act of 1947, more than 500 airports nationwide were turned over to cities in an effort to promote the rapidly growing commercial airline industry. Then in 1948 Idlewild Airport (later re-named JFK) opened in Queens, eight times the size of LGA, having over 600 businesses (including doctor offices and banks) and employing about 30,000 people. This was the beginning of a trend to build large airports in or around major cities. In the 1960's the commercial jetliner age began, resulting in further airport expansion because runways now had to be twice as long as before. Airports now became extensions of the cities they served. The global age of airline traffic started parallel with the growth of global tourism and new immigration. The latter changing the ethnoracial makeup of the U.S. and creating a global awareness.

Here we connected to the third topic, the rise of ethnic consciousness in the U.S. The lecture started out by discussing the origins of the term "ethnicity" in the 1950's social science community. In contrast to its present use, ethnicity then had a negative connotation. Educated people avoided to talk and think in ethnic terms and expected from immigrants full assimilation into the U.S. "melting pot." Ironically, global travel, the war in Vietnam and its domestic aftermath, the development of a media and music culture and other factors nurtured an ethnic identity crisis, and consequently, an ethnic revival movement in the 1960's and 1970's. Now U.S. Americans perceived themselves proudly as Italian-Americans or Irish-Americans, etc. But the search for identity started even earlier among minorities who felt alienated and excluded from American mainstream society. Perhaps the return to ethnic "roots" is related to increasing uniformity and anonymity under the pressure of globalization. However, it would be dangerous to assume that peace and harmony will prevail when diversity comes into the picture and when people begin to see and judge each other through ethnoracial lenses.

3. Discussion

All of the phenomena described above show how local, national, and global events and processes interact and are related to each other. Better transport conditions lead to an increase of immigration and tourism. Immigration increased ethnoracial diversity as well as conflict. Tourism advertised Western lifestyles abroad and required the exchange of goods and services--which in turn created more commerce and immigration. Tourism and travel also expanded horizons and created new identities as a result of the encounter with other cultures and societies. The content of these new identities and the national and local effects of global processes, however, need to be carefully scrutinized. They may be benign but may also spell trouble for a peaceful living together, require a new thinking and new solutions.

A student remarked that there is no better place to study the topic of our class than New York City itself: "New York is the pinnacle of globalization. Growing up as a New Yorker, it is fascinating to study globalization because it is about understanding ourselves and the diversity of our own origins. Particularly when we discover that our blood cousins are part Anglo, part Indian, and part Black." However, becoming aware of ourselves, we also need to ask ourselves a few questions: Being the real and symbolic "pinnacle of globalization," aren't we New Yorkers also in danger of becoming targets of future terrorist attacks and ethnoracial strife? To avoid such an outcome, what can we do to better understand the gripes of other groups, people and nations and how can we address their grievances? Do we as a people and does our government enough to accommodate different immigrant

nationalities and ethnic groups living in New York? If not, what should and could be done?
Is multiculturalism, as Kymlicka suggests, the best answer?