Multidimensional Identity:
Notes Towards A Unified Field Theory for Ethnicity, Religion and Class
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Not very long ago historians didn't worry too much about how the people they wrote about thought about themselves, at least not unless they were members of the rich and powerful elites who were the subject of most historical studies. When it came to the rest, the anonymous masses of the crowd scenes, armies, mass migrations or other popular movements, historians were content to present them in terms which were defined by the same elites who were the focus of historical attention.

Historians, after all, were not interested in studying "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes," or those of the equally inconsequential masses filling the lower orders of European and American societies. Only when the multitude clearly took history into its own hands and threatened to overturn the established order did it seem to be worthy of study. Even then, the actions of "the people" seemed of more consequence than who they were and how they saw themselves.

Given the limited diffusion of higher education until recently, even those intellectuals who identified themselves with revolutionary causes and sought to write their histories were generally not members of the groups the wrote about. Nor had they immersed themselves deeply in the lives of those they wrote about nor had similar experiences in their own lives. Thus, even here, we find only the outsider's viewpoint. Sometimes the outsiders were acute social analysts, but theirs' was still an imposed analysis, one that focused on the external attributes of presumed groups rather than on the subjective consciousness of their members.

None of this is news. About forty years ago E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* brought this issue into the open in regard to the idea of class. He argued that class is not simply an objective classification which can be imposed upon people without regard to their own experience, but is rather a social process which shapes people's views of themselves and their society. Subjective notions of self-identification became an important part of the processes of class formation and class maintenance for historians concerned with class related issues and events.

Thompson's investigation into the subjective aspects of class formation forced him to consider other aspects of identity as well. In the English context, social movements organized around class issues followed movements organized around religion and Thompson found it impossible to talk about the former without considering their relationship to the latter. As Craig Calhoun put it, Thompson "showed clearly [that] religious and labor movements can influence each other, compete for adherents, and complement each other in the lives of some participants; in short they can be part of the same social movement field." But, how can religious and labor movements be
part of the same social movement field unless religious and class identities are themselves in some way part of the same field, a multidimensional field of personal and group identity?

To carry this line of thought even further, class and religion are only two of the ways people form themselves into coherent social groups. Another form of social grouping is the ethnic group--one organized around common descent, in which a shared culture, language and experience are presumed to create the basis for social cohesion rooted in "primordial" social characteristics. Ethnicity, like class, expresses something fundamental about modern societies, but just what these categories express has become a subject of debate among social analysts.

Among historians, the subjective component of class is now widely accepted. But, when it comes to ethnicity, we often seem to be still mired in the dark ages of objective classifications. Historians often follow the common practice of classifying people by whichever apparent characteristics seem most salient to them. Race and language generally seem to be the markers adopted to distinguish categories, perhaps because these markers are most readily apparent to the eye and ear of the outsider. Thus, French speakers are "French," unless they are Black.

The inadequacy of these markers is demonstrated, however, when these historians turn to consider people of their own race and language. No serious American historian would ever dream of suggesting that English, Welsh, Scots and Irish immigrants to America formed a single ethnic group because they were of the "same" race and spoke the "same" language. Even though they came from the same European state and most were native speakers of some variety of English, the historic and cultural distinctions between them were far too well known and too much a part of the Anglo-American historian's sense of cultural significance to be missed or ignored. Few of these same historians, however, would have hesitated to put, for example, Plattdeutschen and Swabians, Prussians and Württembergers, Rhinelanders and Styrians into the same ethnic pot, even when dealing with a time when they all came from different states and Germany was a mere geographic or linguistic expression.

When not totally immersed in ethnocentrism, we have simply assumed that ethnic formations in North America must have corresponded to the folk categories provided for us by nineteenth-century romantic nationalists. That this allegedly "natural" order of ethnicity bore little relationship to social reality, even in Europe, was something that we preferred to ignore in our fascination with the modern nation-state. But, Ernst Renan noted over a century ago that "Forgetting history, and even historical error, are an essential factor in the formation of a nation." We historians, then, must beware of formulations based on nationalist ideologies.

German nationalism was especially strong in the years between 1848 and the creation of a new German Reich (and in later years as well as well), so it is hardly surprising that historians on both sides of the Atlantic have assumed that German speaking migrants to North America were all
just that, Germans. We should take careful note though, of one Rhinelander socialist's recollection that in the 1850's:

Then and even much later the population of the Prussian Rhineland designated each officer and official simply as a 'Pruss.' The Rhinelanders did not feel themselves to be Prussians. If a young man had to become a soldier it was said, 'he has to be a Pruss.'

There was even a curse word for it.³

Germans, like Prussians and Americans would have to be made, they were not born.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that this is true for all nationalities, not just the new nations of Germany and Italy in the nineteenth century or India and Nigeria in the twentieth. The attempt to create a British nationality in which Scots would be transformed into North Britons failed, but the English nationality that was successfully established has still not totally submerged Yorkshire, Lancashire, Devonshire and London natives into a homogeneous Englishness. Eugen Weber taught us that late nineteenth century French peasants still had to be turned into Frenchmen and a century later the French are still not much (if any) more homogeneous than the English. And when the objects of these nationalist would-be creations crossed the Atlantic, the identity that they brought with them was up for grabs.

I'm going to continue to focus primarily on the German speakers for this argument, because they are the group I know best and the appropriate examples come readily to mind, but I want to stress that the processes which I am using them to illustrate are general processes which apply to most (if not all) groups.

An examination of the largest settlement of German speaking migrants to North America, the one in New York City, makes it clear that those we might assume were Germans had other possible national identities available to them.

Gustav Holthusen was not celebrating his German nationality when he wrote:

That which honors the old homeland
the speech which our mothers taught us
O, here in this foreign land
still learned with heart and soul.

That is what this banner stands for
that is why we hold it holy
Proudly we shall show the world
we are, from our deepest hearts, Plattdeutsch!⁴

Nor was Germany the spiritual home of the anonymous author of this "Salute to the Homeland:"

And when at last my lips shall shake
when care shall close my eyes
My heart will soar yet one more time
into your sun-filled light.
As last salute, in final hour
my dying mouth will breath
I salute you
with heart and hand
you sun-filled, blissful,
Hessenland.\(^5\)

And Edmund Fuerholzer was only one of many who felt that their loyalty to the homeland would extend even beyond death:

When at last we must part
When the death bell tolls
and the loyal Bavarian friends
carry us to our final rest
We shall rest well
in foreign earth
far from our Bavarian home.

For over our graves
the Bavarian colors
will span the heavens
White and blue.\(^6\)

But, we should not be tempted to replace one reified construction of nationality with another. If nationality and ethnicity had to be constructed, that doesn't mean that they were constructed all of a piece. The essentialist ideology of nationalism holds that nationality is unitary and that it is a fundamental and indivisible aspect of a person's identity, but historians need not, indeed should not, accept that as axiomatic.

As in so many other aspects of our work, historians have to accept the challenge of complexity in the area of ethnicity. Building on the work of Fredrik Barth, anthropologists have focused on the subjective nature and flexible boundaries of ethnic groups.\(^7\) Joan Vincent went further and pointed out that ethnic groups can be radically redefined to expand or contract their boundaries to suit the needs of the moment. She thus stresses the notion of ethnicity as a social process, the essence of which is lost by analyses that attempt to reify ethnicity into static entities.\(^8\)

But this notion of ethnicity as social process starts to sound familiar. Didn't E.P. Thompson define class as a social process too? Could ethnicity and class be two varieties of the same social process?

Consider Ronald Cohen's definition of ethnicity as "a series of nesting dichotomizations of inclusiveness and exclusiveness." Cohen posited a scale of ethnicity similar to a social distance scale, but one where "ethnicity is an historically derived lumping of sets of diacritics at varying distances outward from the person, so that each of these lumpings acts as a potential boundary or nameable grouping that can be identified with or referred to in ethnic terms..."\(^9\)
The revolutionary aspect of this new conceptualization of ethnicity is that it does not require individuals, or even groups, to subscribe to either exclusive or indivisible ethnic identities. By the same token, we might add, it does not require them to subscribe solely to either an ethnic or a class identity. Context can determine the choice of identity, and on either of the two axes implied by occupation and descent.

Starting with the realm of ethnicity, our new formula for identity means that a person who might identify him or herself as "German," “Italian," “Polish,” “Greek,” “Chinese,” or “Indian” in New York or Toronto could be transformed into an "American" or a "Canadian" upon a return to Europe or Asia. Many German Protestants in the nineteenth century United States, especially when dealing with rabidly anti-Catholic neighbors, preferred to stress their identity as Protestants over a German alternative--some even went so far as to create German speaking sections of American nativist societies. Some German immigrants found greater tolerance for Jews than for Germans in rural America, and they chose to identify themselves simply as Jews—while, at the same time, other German Jews felt that they had to create their own German synagogues rather than join those of their American coreligionists.

In fact, the ability to choose between several possible ethnic identifications is often a distinct advantage in complex societies, and it appears that people constantly made (and make) such choices. Any theoretical concept of ethnicity that fails to allow for the making of such choices must certainly impoverish our understanding of the complex social realities we study.

Ethnic identifications are built upon those perceived cultural distinctions that many social scientists and historians have reified as "primordial" characteristics--the same characteristics that Cohen identified as "historically derived lumping sets of diacritics." But, these perceived distinctions are not, in themselves, sufficient to generate ethnic identities. Ethnic identities tend to be formed out of cultural differences in the context of structural oppositions--that is, situations in which members of socially marked groups find themselves in direct or indirect competition for scarce social goods such as economic resources, political power, desirable mates or the favor of the deity.

In fact, the United States and many other countries have long been societies in which both economic resources and political power have been distributed on the basis of racial and cultural distinctions, a type of stratification which Michael Hechter termed a "cultural division of labor." This was particularly apparent in the segmentation of the nineteenth century U.S. labor force along ethnic lines, where labor-force segmentation created structural oppositions between whites and nonwhites, Americans and immigrants, German immigrants and Irish immigrants.

In the context of the broader American society that made distinctions between speakers of the same language only when the language was English, New Yorkers from German-speaking
lands were identified as, and perforce identified themselves as, Germans. This ascribed identity was inescapable, but it did not fully determine the self-identity of those subjected to it. In the overwhelmingly German atmosphere of German New York in the mid-nineteenth century, as in German-speaking central Europe, an identification as simply German was virtually meaningless in its generality. In these essentially German contexts sub-national characteristics became paramount as markers of identity. Even then, however, individual German New Yorkers might have had several potential or actual identifications to choose from. In some contexts a religious identification--Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Jew, or Freethinker--might seem most apposite. In other contexts, the German New Yorkers' town or region of origin would seem most salient and would be the basis for their self-identification. In yet other contexts, spoken dialect would identify German speakers as members of one or another sub-national group.

Similar conditions often existed in other immigrant settings, including some where such distinctions hardly ever grace the pages of our histories. Irish immigrant communities had their Kerrymen and Corkmen, Protestants and Catholics, Irish and English speakers--sets of divisions that opened up various possibilities for self-identification to those who came from the Emerald Isle. They too would have to make choices, and so would almost any others we could name.

It was in the process of repeated use by large numbers of people, that these individual identities or identifications were transformed into more or less coherent groups. Gradually they became institutionalized and the groundwork for their reification by social scientists was established.

Thus the different sorts of German speakers and the choices they made, or at least those recognized by observers, gradually seemed to confirm the existence of a German or German-American ethnic group. But the same sort of process had a very different trajectory when it confirmed an Irish-American ethnic group while reifying a religious divide that accepted Irish Protestants as another distinct ethnic group called the "Scots-Irish." Neither of these outcomes was necessarily foreordained.

The use of sub-national characteristics as paramount markers of identity in German New York provided a natural basis for the formation of ethnic groups and ethnic identity. As I discovered in the course of my study of German New York, more restricted sub-national ethnic identities developed institutional supports over the years and became increasingly concrete.

At the same time, the tendency for people to opt for those sets of boundary markers that maximized the similarity of group members and which assured that groups would remain small, coexisted with a contrary tendency to opt for broader sets of boundary markers, ones that increased the utility of the group to its members by enlarging its size to significant proportions. The first tendency tended to restrict ethnic formations to the small scale of Heimat or hometown,
while the second tended to promote a pan-German ethnicity that would include “German”
speakers who came from anyplace between Alsace and Transylvania or the Volga—and without
any reference to religious distinctions that might have been crucial boundary markers in their
homelands. The tension between the two tendencies produced a variety of intermediate ethnic
formations along several different axes, and the conflict between these contrary tendencies was
never resolved.

One major axis of identification in German New York and other major centers of German
speaking settlement in North America was place of origin. In the process of chain-migration
emigrants chose between North and South America; chose between the U.S. and Canada; chose
between various regions and states, even between cities, neighborhoods and blocks—all on the
basis of where they had contacts who could give them advice before they left and who could
provide them with a place to stay, and assistance in finding a job, a home or land when they
arrived.

In rural areas this process created settlements of relatively cohesive origins, like New
Holstein, Iowa; Baden and New Bremen, Missouri; and Germantown and Herman, Wisconsin.
But the same process was at work in New York City. As one German journalist noted at the time,
"the Brandenburgers and Plattdeutschen seem as little inclined to be among the Süddeutschen as
among the Irish and Americans whom the Germans have thrust from their quarter." Indeed, there
was often real antagonism in which "the Plattdeutsche is against the High German, the Swabian
against the Bavarian, the Würtenerberger [sic] against the Prussian."

A single building or a few buildings on a block could become the nucleus of a
neighborhood built around the common origin of a majority of its residents in a town, city or
region of Germany. While outsiders saw only a gigantic Little Germany or "Dutchtown" with
over a hundred thousand residents, Germans saw a conglomeration of dozens of small
neighborhoods, "an island of true German small-towners in a metropolitan sea of houses."

I have focused on German speakers for my argument, but the same patterns were found in other
immigrant communities as well. Historians of the migrations from Italy to America have always
stressed these sorts of patterns, but the same patterns also turn up among immigrant groups where
they have been largely ignored historiographically. Moses Rischin's map of regional and national
origin districts within the Jewish Lower East Side has often been reproduced, but only rarely has
anyone considered its implications. Carol Groneman found separate residential clusters for
immigrants from Counties Sligo, Cork and Kerry, while Thomas Brown's casual reference to the
"Kerry Patches, Donegal Squares and Corkman's Hollows which were to be found in virtually all
cities," treats them as if their existence was so obvious that it could never be missed. Nor was
this just a matter of mere preference, newly formed county-based allegiances among Irish
immigrants sometimes formed the basis for lethal faction fights and large scale riots, an enmity
which made the hostility between different groups of German speakers pale by comparison.\textsuperscript{14}

Only after historians actively search for such patterns will we be able to say how pervasive they
really were with any certainty, but there are already grounds for presuming that they may well
have been nearly universal--after all, what else would explain their appearance among immigrants
from such diverse backgrounds as those already discussed and migrants from China, Japan and
Korea; Puerto Rico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.\textsuperscript{15}

Common origin influenced far more than just choice of residence in German New York.
German speaking immigrants were people who formed and joined organizations at a phenomenal
rate, and the \textit{Vereine} of Little Germany were legion. The German speakers banded together for
all kinds of ostensible purposes--or for none at all. Almost any shared characteristic could be the
basis for an organization, there was even a German Bald-headed Men's \textit{Verein}. But, explicit or
not, one of the most common characteristics of New York's \textit{Verein} way of life, its \textit{Vereinswesen},
was that the associations were composed of members from similar origins in Germany.

\textit{Unterstützungsvereine}, sickness and death benefit societies, could be (and were) organized
on any of a number of bases, but those organized around common origins predominated by the
1860s. This may have resulted from a discovery that common origin was more likely than other
factors to keep the treasurer honest in a new world where it was easy to change your name and
occupation. Hometowners, or \textit{Landsleute}, had been known since childhood--they couldn't run off
with the treasury without the disgrace affecting their families and they would have to cut
themselves off from their kin to avoid apprehension if they did.

These \textit{Landsmannschaften} provided formal mechanisms for strengthening local and
regional ties from Germany. A decade after the first great wave of migration, just when
particularism might have begun to weaken in the great metropolis, German New Yorkers created
formal organizations designed to strengthen local ties. Social activities--meetings, dances and
picnics--brought hometowners and their families together many times a year, while the mutual
support provided in times of sickness and death deepened their emotional ties. When death
intruded, the benefits went beyond financial and emotional support; \textit{Landsmannschaft}
membership assured the good turnout at funerals that symbolized and was an essential aspect of
respectability. [Remember the Bavarian friends that Edmund Fuerholzer was counting on to carry
him to his final rest]. Beyond the funeral, the \textit{Landsmannschaften} often held joint burial plots in
cemeteries. They thereby established a permanent symbolic bond between members--one that
really did extend beyond death. In the long run, the \textit{Landsmannschaften} transformed a nostalgic
and fading sense of identity with a place in Germany into a living social network that provided
friendship, mutual aid and solace in the present along with a sense of continuity with the past.
Once again, as with residential concentration by place of origin, we must note that Landsmannschaft type organizations are generally found among most urban immigrant groups in the U.S. and have been common in urban migrations throughout the world.

While the Landsmannschaften were explicitly local and regional in origin, other organizations like fraternal lodges, shooting clubs, singing societies and even churches, often shared local origins as well. As the ties to their homeland grew ever more distant over time, it became more and more important to broaden their ties if they were to maintain their members' sense of self-identity and pass it on to their American born children. To do so they moved up the geographic scale to form New York's regional Volksfestvereine. Swabians, Bavarians, Plattdeutschen, Hessians, Saxons, Thuringians and even Lichtensteiners, each group in turn formed a Volksfestverein that sponsored a massive regional festival every year to promote the dialect, customs, culture and community of immigrants from a particular region of Germany. The Swabians and Plattdeutschen also published newspapers and books in their regional dialects to keep their languages alive. The depth of their particularism is indicated by the fact that when the Swabian Canstatter Volksfestverein raised funds for relief in the postwar crisis of 1920 they were designated for the relief of Württemberg alone and not for German relief—the non-Swabians were still strangers for whom they felt no obligation.

Just about the time that German-Americans were organizing their Volksfestvereine, Irish-Americans began to organize County associations that bore a striking resemblance to the Volksfestvereine. Later, they banded together into the United Irish Counties association which still sponsors an Irish Volksfest called the United Irish Counties Feis. It was a generation later that Eastern European Jewish Landsmannschaften followed a similar pattern and organized regional federations. The Ferband, a federation of Galician and Bukovenian organizations, led the way in 1903 and was soon followed by federations of Russians, Poles and Rumanians. Parallel developments among migrants in other countries come readily to mind and I suspect that similar associations will turn up among other American immigrants once we take the trouble to look for them.

While geography and dialect provided one dimension of association with different degrees of exclusiveness, religion provided another. German New Yorkers were divided into Jewish, Catholic, Protestant or Freethinker communities, but that was just the start.

Some Catholics followed the motto of the Katholische Volkszeitung, "First Catholic, then German." Others made almost as much over the distinction between Rhenish, Bavarian and Austrian Catholics as they did between German, Irish and Polish ones.

German Protestants were even more likely to make such distinctions, but they were faced as well with a variety of distinct denominations and a theological distinction between Lutherans
and Calvinists. The number of combinations and permutations of Protestant identity that this allowed for was truly enormous.

Jews too had denominational differences. The line between orthodox and Reform Jews was marked with a bitterness that was rarely overcome in the nineteenth century. Then there were the unaffiliated Jews who were no longer associated with the Jewish religion, but who continued to maintain a Jewish identity and to participate in Jewish communal activities like the B'nai B'rith, Jewish *Landsmannschaften* and other *Vereine*. Sometimes all that united the German speaking Jews was a sense of German superiority over supposedly "lesser" Jews from Eastern Europe—and even then some of the orthodox would side with their orthodox coreligionists from the east against the proponents of a German *Kultur* that undermined Jewish orthodoxy. Then too, for a long time there was an open social fissure between Bavarian, Rhenish and Berliner Jews that operated independently of their orthodoxy or lack thereof.

Of all the religious groupings, only the Freethinkers seemed to be entirely free of regional divisions. Fully committed to German *Kultur* and nationalism, at least before the Prussian state created an unanticipatedly illiberal German nation-state, the Freethinkers had no place for regionalism. Still, even their "pure" nationalism seemed at times to cast doubts upon the German credentials of anyone who could claim to be "First Catholic, then German," or who might place any other religion first. At the very least, they subscribed to an idea of Germanness which would place their own group at the center of a German-American community in which *Kirchendeutschen* of all persuasions were somewhat marginal at best.

What we have discovered, then, is that we have two different systems of group and individual identification, one based on place of origin and the other upon religious affiliation [and, we must stress, affiliation and not necessarily belief]. Each provides a scale of social distance, one with potential borders marked out at various points as one moves away from a starting point defined by the characteristics of the individual or group concerned. Both scales seem to operate on much the same principles of flexible groupings that can be selected to fit the context of the moment, and neither scale is exclusive. It is as if they were two different axes on a graph which allow for the location of individual and/or group identity in two dimensions, each of which may have "historically derived diacritics at varying distances outward from the person, so that each of these lumpings acts as a potential boundary or nameable grouping that can be identified with or referred to..." in, shall we say, ethno-religious terms.

Sometimes only one of the dimensions might be seen as relevant and identity would be located on or very close to that single axis. All people from a certain place or of a certain religious affiliation would then be in the group, regardless of their status on the other scale—as in all *Plattdeutschen* being welcome in the *Plattdeutschen Volksfest Verein*, whether Catholic, Jew,
Protestant or Freethinker; or all Catholics, whether German Irish, Polish or Italian being welcome [more or less] in the same Church.

At other times, however, both dimensions would be perceived as relevant determinants of identity. Then, individual or group identity would not be formed around a point on either of the axes, but would rather be located around a point defined by the intersection of two coordinates, one from each of the two axes. In those terms, Catholic Plattdeutschen could calculate social distance from Calvinist, Lutheran and Jewish Plattdeutschen, but also from Swabian, Austrian, Italian and Irish Catholics.

If these distinctions seem far-fetched, we need only to consider one of the most common contexts for measuring social distance, determining the suitability of potential spouses. Where is the line to be drawn? Some religious boundaries were almost impermeable, to be sure. Catholics, Protestants and Jews rarely intermarried—and when they did so they were often ostracized by the members of one or both of their groups of origin.

But, while German speaking Catholics in New York resisted out-marriage, they not only refrained from marrying both non-Catholics and non-Germans, they also made distinctions between various sorts of German Catholics—as the low rate of intermarriage between Bavarians and Austrians in New York attests. Among German speaking Protestants, a Lutheran New Yorker with roots in the Rhineland might or might not view a Rhineland Calvinist as a more suitable potential spouse than a Lutheran from Saxony. And these high rates of endogamy extended to the American born generation as well, with the children of Prussian immigrants in New York setting the pace—with a 92% rate of regional endogamy.19

In the complex environment of German New York, it would be hard to predict how choices between the relative salience of region and religion would turn out in any particular case, and different standards would doubtless be applied to different sorts of social relationships—who you are willing to work with or live near might well be less stringently defined than who you might be willing to marry or admit into your family circle. Still, decisions like this, when repeated over time, could gradually mark the effective boundaries of increasingly identifiable social groups—groups defined by both region and religion as elements in a single field for determining social distance.

Of course, this sort of group definition is not something that can easily be determined from a census return. It is far easier to stick to ascribed categories than to try to work out the group identifications that really applied to those we study.

Again we must note that similar patterns were widespread, though we must generally be content with only the regional component if we are dependent on census figures. Joseph Barton reports 93-97% regional endogamy rates for Italians in Cleveland, 89% for Rumanians and 73%
for Slovaks. June Alexander found extremely high regional endogamy rates among Pittsburgh's Slovaks and reports that they even maintained a 65% endogamy rate on the county-of-origin level. The low rates of intermarriage between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews is well known, as is that between German and East European Jews, but it is still startling when Klaus Hödel reports 55-75% endogamy rates for second generation, that is American born, Galician Jews. Finally, endogamy among Irish Catholics and Protestants is taken for granted, but Carol Groneman found evidence in the marriage records of New York's Church of the Transfiguration that Irish Catholics (like their German and Italian co-religionists) practiced regional endogamy too. Apparently only the failure of historians to investigate the topic has kept us from discovering how widespread such patterns were.

Nor, it must be said, will the two dimensions of identification we have been considering suffice to explain the parameters of individual and group identification. Instead we must return to our question about the relationship between ethnicity as a social process and class as a social process.

The daily round of labor and production is one of the most intensive, time-consuming and lasting of human activities. So it is no surprise that human beings are often identified with and define themselves in terms of the activities that dominate their lives. Hunter, farmer, trader, maker of shoes. Goodwife, mother, seamstress, housekeeper, career woman. Specialized occupations, paid or not, become defining roles, especially in large scale societies where social contacts are often limited to Gessellschaft type interactions where little besides a person's occupation may be relevant.

Occupations defined as trades or crafts--butchers, bakers, candlestick makers--were widespread in Europe and America before the nineteenth century (and sometimes well after). A craft or trade consciousness was commonly the result of a career path structured from apprentice to journeyman to master, and this consciousness or form of identity has never entirely disappeared. The impulse to form trade unions can be seen as the result of trade consciousness continuing after the link between journeyman and master becomes tenuous or broken.

Lenin, citing Karl Kautsky, identified the formation of craft consciousness as the natural tendency of untutored workers, saying "[t]he history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness..." Selig Perlman took this principle and elevated what he called "job consciousness" into a key element in his theoretical analysis of the development of labor movements. But whether denigrating it or elevating it into a noble principle, both Lenin and Perlman treated these forms of consciousness as polar opposites, two incompatible views of the world rather than as Cohen's "series of nesting dichotomizations of inclusiveness and exclusiveness."
That was a serious mistake. For historians it is much more useful to ask where, with an increasing specialization of labor, were the boundaries of crafts or trades, or even classes, to be located? To take an example from German New York were cigar makers all members of the same trade—or were tobacco strippers, cigar packers and cigar rollers members of separate trades? Once again, the question cannot be answered properly when posed in the abstract. In some contexts, especially within a shop or factory, they were definitely distinct trades. But, in a meeting of the citywide Arbeiter Union or the International Workingmen's Association, they would all have been cigar makers. Indeed, in the later context they might well identify themselves simply as workers or proletarians and make no distinctions between cigar makers, shoemakers, piano makers and tailors.

Furthermore, occupation, like the other dimensions was not always a pure indicator of identity. Just as origin and religion could both be factors in individual and group identity (with Bavarian Protestants, Bavarian Catholics and Bavarian Jews being defined at times as separate groups), so too could origin and occupation be mixed in defining individual and group identity. Many men joined together to act on their common identity and interests as tailors in mid-nineteenth century New York, but they organized two separate unions in the spring of 1850, one for the English speaking tailors and another for the German speakers. That was an accommodation to both trade and ethnic forms of consciousness. When the German Catholic priests at the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer called on Catholics among the German tailors to stay away from such godless institutions as trade unions, they introduced religion as a third dimension into the equation of identity. Indeed, this is a perfect example of people acting to define or create their individual and group identities in terms of all three dimensions, not in an abstract and permanent form, but in the context of specific events and pressures.

By the early 1870s the variety of potential identities open to and chosen by German immigrants to New York was very large indeed. And, what is particularly striking is how often they were not mutually exclusive. A German New Yorker could attend a German Reformed Church on Sunday morning and then go off to a picnic organized by a Landsmannschaft Verein in the afternoon. A few weeks later he or she might participate in the activities leading up to the annual Cannstatter Volksfest Verein festival, a celebration of Swabian particularism. The very same person would also have been likely to have joined the widespread celebrations that followed the German victory in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871.

In all of these activities the ethno-religious dimensions of identity would appear to be paramount, so one might conclude that occupation and class were basically irrelevant to the self-identity of this immigrant. But to do so could be to make a serious mistake. The same Swabian cabinetmaker might well be an active member of the German Furniture Makers Union (der
Vereinigte Möbelarbeiter Verein). While he might have cancelled his support for the Arbeiter Union newspaper when it opposed taking sides in the Franco-Prussian War, he would have enthusiastically supported his union a year later when it took the lead in creating an Eight Hour League with cabinetmaker Richard Schlüter as president.

The Eight Hour League went on to organize the biggest strike wave New York City had ever seen. At its call, well over a hundred thousand workers turned out to strike for the eight-hour day. On May 18, 1872 the same Swabian cabinet maker who had celebrated his various ethnic identities only a short time before, would have cheered Konrad Kuhn's proletarian class conscious speech threatening "war between the two classes" if the eight-hour day was not granted by the city's employers. And on June 10th he would have marched with his fellow cabinet makers in the great eight-hour day parade--with the American and German national flags flying in front of them and the red flag of the international proletariat flying right behind.

But if class-conscious proletarian internationalism had come to the fore, that doesn't mean that ethnicity had disappeared. Despite the expectations of Marxists that ethnic and national distinctions would fade when the workers of the world—or the city—would unite, these other forms of identity remained strong—even if they were set aside for the moment. By the same token, it would be equally mistaken to assume that the class-consciousness expressed in the Spring of 1872 was not genuine. If we restore religion to the picture, it remains true that all three sorts of identity were readily available in various forms--and all three modes of identification could very well have been experienced more or less simultaneously, and without any sense of incompatibility, by any number of German New Yorkers.

With this sort of analysis we can escape from the historical tradition of putting people into objective analytical categories which amount to Procrustean boxes. Instead, we have developed a three-dimensional model of identity as a single field that can encompass subjective ethnic, religious and class factors at the same time. The model is admittedly not a simple one to apply. Mechanical application of a few simple rules will not suffice to describe and analyze social groups whose boundaries are subjective, flexible and subject to radical redefinition at any moment. Nonetheless, it is a model which far more nearly approximates reality than the simpler notions we have stuck with for so many years, and it will enable us to produce a history and a social analysis which is far more sophisticated than any we have been able to produce so far.
Endnotes:

3 Ferdinand August Bebel, Aus meinem Leben (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), 21.
4 Bernhard Meyborg, Geschichte des Plattdütschen Volksfest-Vereen (New York: Plattdütsche Post, 1892), 10-11.
15 I might add the anthropological literature on urban migrations in Africa, Latin America and Asia to reinforce the notion of universality in this matter. See Philip Mayer, Townsman or Tribesman and "Migrancy and the Study of Africans in Towns"; Marc Howard Ross and Thomas S. Weisner "The Rural-Urban Migrant Network in Kenya: Some General Implications"; and Aidan Southall, ed., Urban Anthropology, for an introduction to some of this literature.
18 Hödel, "Vom Shtetl an die Lower East Side," 185.
19 Stanley Nadel, Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York City, 1845-1880 (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 49.
22 Hödel, "Vom Shtetl an die Lower East Side," 122.
23 Carol Groneman Pernicone, "The 'Bloody Ould Sixth',' fn. 18, 86.
24 V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done? (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 31 & 39. The citation is to a similar argument Kautsky made in die Neue Zeit, 1901-02, XX, 1, #3, 79. It must be admitted that they are talking about socialist consciousness & not class-consciousness, but the implications of their argument are close enough to what we are dealing with here for our purposes.