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Social science and ethnic options

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It is always gratifying for an author to know that their academic research and writing is read and taken seriously long after it is completed and published. Yiorgos Anagnostou's thoughtful and passionate paper most certainly engages with some of the central arguments of my 1990 book *Ethnic Options* and raises some provocative questions about its methodology, ideology and its relevance for understanding current issues of race and ethnicity. I think that we fundamentally disagree about issues of epistemology and the value of social scientific research, and I suspect that we also have some political disagreements, although I am not sure of the exact nature of Anagnostou's stance on issues of racial equality and justice. Yet, I am pleased that we agree that ethnic identity remains a fascinating and complex social phenomenon, worthy of informed debate and scrutiny.

Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation, completed over 20 years ago. I can now see that, like many academic books (especially first books), it has deep autobiographical roots. I grew up as a third-generation upwardly mobile Irish American. Being Irish was the only reality my four immigrant grandparents knew in the US. It meant a lot to my parents, who grew up in ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods and attended homogeneous schools, surrounded not only by Irish Americans, but primarily by second-generation Irish Americans. Yet by the time my seven brothers and sisters and I entered young adulthood, ethnicity was much less salient – we lived in white neighborhoods, but surrounded by other ethnicities, we intermarried and formed close friendships and ties with other whites, and increasingly over

the years with people from a wide variety of races and ethnic backgrounds. So I was personally fascinated with ethnicity and what it meant and how it changed over time and over generations. How could something that defined almost every aspect of life for my grandparents and parents become so inconsequential for me?

I also trained as a sociologist and demographer and co-authored a book analyzing 1980 US Census data on later-generation white ethnics using the census ancestry data (Lieberson and Waters, 1988). These data demonstrated with statistical confidence what I had experienced on a personal level – white ethnics intermarried at high rates, patterns of ethnic distinctiveness in income, occupation, place of residence and educational attainment were either non-existent or greatly attenuated. Indeed, the 1980 Census data showed that assimilation into mainstream white America was very advanced and that ethnicity did not predict these important life outcomes. It also showed that intermarriage was so widespread that most people by the third or later generation were the product of an intermarriage and that many were choosing to identify on the Census with only one or two of the possible combinations of ancestries in their backgrounds.

I did the interviews with suburban third- and later-generation Catholic white ethnics that formed the empirical basis of *Ethnic Options* in order to explore what determined the choices these people made about their identities, in order to explore whether ethnicity mattered to these people, and in what ways being a white ethnic who could choose an identity affected how they thought about important issues of the day – especially race relations and programs designed to help racial minorities, such as affirmative action. My work began inductively with an observed empirical puzzle – people were choosing identities in a census and yet social scientists did not know what the choices meant or how people made the choices.

The work on symbolic ethnicity by Herbert Gans was very helpful in naming and helping me to interpret the patterns I found when I interviewed people. Analyzing my interview transcripts, it became evident to me that Gans had accurately predicted some of the important aspects of later-generation white ethnicity – it was intermittent, used selective ethnic symbols and had little impact on measurable aspects of socioeconomic or social integration with the rest of US society. Part of the contribution of my work was to provide the empirical support and grounding for the concept that Gans had posited but not researched. At the very same time, sociologist Richard Alba, using survey research, and studying the Albany, New York metropolitan area, reached very similar conclusions and provided independent empirical support for Gans' concept (Alba, 1990). In the last few decades, scholars have extended the ideas of symbolic ethnicity and ethnic options to non-white populations, exploring whether either concept is useful for understanding the experiences of non-whites, both in the US and in Europe (DaCosta, 2007; Jimenez, 2004; Kibria, 2002; Lacy, 2004;

Song, 2003; Tuan, 1998; Waters, 1996). As intermarriage rates among native-born Asians and Hispanics reach unprecedented levels, the ways in which their children will choose an ethnic or racial identity will affect the overall demographic composition of America's racial and ethnic groups (Qian and Lichter, 2007; Waters and Jimenez, 2005).

I believe that *Ethnic Options* also made another contribution to the field, in addition to its empirical documentation of how people choose identities and of how symbolic ethnicity persisted on the ground. In the last chapter, I argued that the attitudes these whites had toward blacks was in part shaped by their own experience of ethnicity as costless and voluntary and their lack of understanding of the ways in which race was very different from ethnicity. I argued that individualism and choice in ethnicity blinded whites to the realities of externally imposed racial identifications that were involuntary and prevented whites from supporting public policies that would overcome and make up for past discrimination. In a recent ethnographic study of white racial attitudes, Monica McDermott (2006) explores how whites who have an ethnic identity as Irish reconcile that identity with anti-black prejudice and discrimination.

Anagnostou takes issue with both symbolic ethnicity and ethnic options and generally conflates the two. He does not like the conclusion I reached that ethnicity is increasingly a choice for later-generation whites in the US. I argued that they can choose among various ancestries they believe to be in their family histories, and that they can choose whether to be ethnic at all. I also argued that ethnicity had become symbolic.

Anagnostou does not like this and asks: 'Are we prepared to acquiesce in the conclusion that symbolic ethnicity inevitably draws for us – namely that of middle-class white ethnicity as socially weak, artificial and leisure-centered?' This is the empirical reality I found in my interviews, as well as the conclusions of those who analyzed other sources of data on later-generation white ethnics. Yet Anagnostou dislikes this reality very much. He would rather that ethnicity among whites in the US reflect 'a set of practices that profoundly shape an individual's life, and not as a fleeting manipulation of symbols'. Indeed, he not only knows that ethnicity should be found to be profoundly influential, but he knows what ethnicity should do. It should be a source of 'an ethic of ethnic solidarity' against 'unbridled capitalism'. Ethnicity should accomplish this by connecting descendants of immigrants with histories of immigration to inform an enduring ethical stance.

I share Anagnostou's political desire for something to stand against unbridled capitalism. I think the world would be a better place if we could find that wellspring of ethics and solidarity. However, there is one problem with this hope. There is no empirical support for it! But this does not stop Anagnostou. Because there is a place where he can find the powerful effects of ethnicity in the service of the ethical fight against capitalism. At the movies! The example he gives of the ethic of ethnic solidarity is

exemplified by a character who is a second-generation Greek American in a film called *Achilles' Love*. I too could find examples of strong ethnicity in fiction and film and television. Or, if I wanted to create a world in which ethnicity was strong, where later-generation whites interpreted the struggles of their immigrant ancestors in ways I found politically appealing, I could just make it up and write a fictional short story. But I am hampered by something that does not constrain Anagnostou – I am a social scientist and I am trying to study and describe empirical reality. In late 20th- and early 21st- century America, most later-generation whites are of mixed ethnic ancestry, choose easily among the available ethnic options they have and do not appear to be subjectively or objectively shaped by those ethnic choices in any measurable way.

But Anagnostou does not just fault my conclusions, he raises questions about my methodology. He writes: 'I am not concerned here to challenge the empirical validity of symbolic ethnicity, to approach it in other words as a *falsifiable* sociological theory whose truth claims can be tested against further evidence.' Yet, this was my approach. I did write the book as a falsifiable sociological study. No study, especially a small one based on 60 in-depth interviews can claim to have definitively proved a hypothesis. Thus, I acknowledged in the book that perhaps there would be studies that could find a stronger or different role for ethnicity among this population and I mused that perhaps there would be behavioral differences among white ethnics that they would not be aware of but that would unconsciously shape some measurable aspect of their lives. Anagnostou cites this standard social scientific acknowledgment that further research could find something very different as an 'embarrassing' contradiction. He writes that 'Waters openly recognizes that the paradigm . . . cannot seriously claim a monopoly of truth on white ethnicity' and 'What are we to make of a paradigm that consents to the validity of its opposite?' To that I would reply that we call such a paradigm empirical social science. The epistemology behind it is that we conduct a study, report to the best of our abilities what our methods and samples and results are, and acknowledge that further studies could either support those findings or refute them. In part, Anagnostou and I are operating with different ground rules – he is using novels and films to 'prove' that Greek ethnicity is a strong and potent force; I am using statistical data and in-depth interviews to 'argue' that later-generation white ethnicity is best described as optional and symbolic. Anagnostou thinks I embarrass myself by allowing that social scientists with better measurements or methods might prove me wrong. I think that all social scientists must be prepared to have their results challenged with conflicting evidence. Yet I do not find any conflicting evidence based in real research in Anagnostou's article with which to argue.

There is a challenge though that I would lay out for Professor Anagnostou and it is one he himself invokes. He asks 'Why not employ sociological

methods in addition to interviewing that will allow a more comprehensive exploration of “the total effect of ethnicity on the respondents”?’ He argues that ‘A focus on practice – through ethnographic research on a person’s history within social fields associated with ethnicity *or through analysis of ethnic narratives* promises to excavate how the immigrant and ethnic past shape socially meaningful and enduring commitments in the present’ (emphasis added). I would welcome such an ethnography. And if one has been done in the last 17 years, I venture to think Anagnostou would have found it and cited it. But he does not. However, by slipping in the term ‘ethnic narrative’ Anagnostou solves his problem. If there is no ethnography to demonstrate the kind of ethnicity he desires, then he can use a fictional narrative. But just because the author of that fictional narrative imagined something to be true, does not make it true.

Finally, Anagnostou takes me to task for what he sees as the political and ideological agenda that ethnic options play. He argues that my work, along with that of historians such as Jacobsen and Roediger who write about how southern and central European immigrants were absorbed into the ‘white’ racial category, contributes to a melting pot ideal of American society. He writes: ‘What better testimony that racially inscribed differences are social constructs that can be transcended and, in fact, rendered obsolete?’ He argues that this work contributes to the ideological goal of creating a society in which race will cease to matter and he ‘exposes’ me of being guilty of a project of social engineering: the transcending of race-based categories in the US.

I do think that the transcendence of race-based categories in the US, and elsewhere in the world, would be a good political outcome, and I do think that one implication of the work on the social changes associated with assimilation of European immigrants is that it is possible for boundaries between groups to shift and ultimately to dissolve (Alba, 2005; Waters, 2002). But whether race will decline in significance over time is a very open empirical, as well as an ideological question. And in my recent work I have been exploring exactly these issues – to what degree is the racial classification system in the US changing? Are some new immigrants and their descendants actually developing ‘racial options’? What role do changes in government statistical classification systems play in individual racial identifications (Perlmann and Waters, 2002)? How is the American racial order changing with the absorption of the millions of non-white immigrants who have come to the US in the last 50 years? These are fascinating questions and in my opinion they are best investigated by empirical social science research. If I could write the ‘narrative’ for the future, it would be a world where race did not determine anyone’s life chances, where racial identity was optional, symbolic, intermittent and enjoyable. Having chosen social science over literature as a specialization, however, I have to be content with documenting and explaining reality, not inventing it.

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