1992

Review of Alba's "Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America"

Terry Huffman
George Fox University, thuffman@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty
Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/103

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - School of Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
Ethnicity is as much a process as it is a product. Although social scientists may verbally admit this reality, their work often treats ethnicity as a static phenomenon. Nevertheless, the fluidity of ethnicity has received notable attention from such scholars as Herbert Gans ("symbolic ethnicity," 1979) and Stanford Lyman and William Douglas (ethnicity as "impression management," 1973). Taking a symbolic ethnicity theoretical conception, Richard Alba addresses the changing role of ethnicity in the lives of white Americans.

In this much needed work on the dynamics of white ethnicity, Alba's central thesis is that ethnicity among American whites is "in the midst of a fundamental transformation" (p.3). Specifically, the author argues that the once prominent ethnic distinctions based on European ancestry have become less important and are fading into the social background. However, while this has occurred, other ethnic distinctions (those based upon race) have emerged. The result is the forming of a "new ethnic group" based on ancestry from anywhere in Europe.

The bulk of Ethnic Identity (chapters 2-7) reports the author's research on the impact of ethnicity on the personal lives of a sample of white Americans. This sample, taken from the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area of New York, included 524 randomly selected subjects who participated in in-depth interviews. By all accounts this was an ambitious and carefully conducted social scientific research project. The researcher sought to reveal how notions of ethnicity have influenced aspects of social life including preferences in food, friends, organizational memberships, prejudice, knowledge of ancestral ethnic heritage, even children's sense of and interest in ethnic identity.

The findings indicate the social boundaries separating white ethnic groups are disappearing and, perhaps more importantly, life chances among different groups once based on ethnicity seem to have been leveled. Alba states, "The objective changes among whites can be traced in terms of the convergence of life chances in education and employment and the decline of cultural indicators such as language, but the most compelling evidence of change is undoubtedly the great extent and ease of intermarriage" (p.291).

Alba concludes that ethnicity among the subjects is largely symbolic and includes only the most minor cultural traditions, which, it might be added, involve few everyday personal costs to the subjects. "The nature of the most common ethnic experiences seems to fit with the social milieus in which most whites find themselves, which involve continual contact among persons of
varied ethnic ancestries.... In general, the common ethnic experiences are unlikely to generate conflict with people of other backgrounds and, in most cases, are capable of being shared across ethnic lines. This seems true for the most frequently cited experiences of eating ethnic foods, discussing one's ethnic background with others, feeling curious about the backgrounds of others, and attending ethnic festivals. These are mainly experiences in private rather than public realms; they are innocuous, unlikely to give offense or even attract negative comment...." (p. 297).

This reviewer was bothered by the author's use of the terms ethnicity and race interchangeably. In fact, throughout the book Alba does not seem to place much importance to notions of race at all. He seems reluctant to call the "transformation" among whites what it may well be--the rise in racial consciousness and solidarity resulting from a greater racial polarization in the United States. It is only at the end of the book that the author hints at this possibility: "...the United States remains a society in which social boundaries drawn on the basis of ethnic ancestry--and I include race under this heading--remain of paramount importance; indeed, the prominence of ethnicity as a boundary may be increasing as a result of the surge of immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean since 1965, which has imparted new vitality to some older ethnic groups...." (pp. 311-312).

By not recognizing the basic difference between ethnicity and race, the author fails to tease out the full implications of his own findings. In short, the decline in notions of ethnic differences among whites have corresponded with increased racial solidarity. Given recent events in Los Angeles, among other places, this phenomenon deserves more than passing note.

One of the strengths of Alba's work is that it offers empirical confirmation to what many already have as a visceral understanding. That is, many social scientists have assumed for some time now that ethnicity is a less salient part of personal identity for many white Americans and Alba's research findings are consistent with those assumptions. Furthermore, Ethnic Identity is thoroughly researched and well written. Although readers may find the report of the findings tedious (a large segment of the book), the theoretical implications are well worth the effort.