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1

Introduction

THE NARRATIVE OF THE MAJORITY-MINORITY SOCIETY

Many Americans believe that their society is on the precipice of a momentous transformation, brought about by the inevitable demographic slide of the white population into numerical minority status and the consequent ascent of a new majority made up of nonwhites. The large-scale immigration of the last half-century is a major driver of current demographic change, as is the aging of the white population. Should it occur, the transformation to what is often called a “majority-minority” society—one in which today’s ethno-racial minorities (African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans)* together will constitute a majority of

*I generally use the term “ethno-racial” to refer to the distinctions that Americans commonly make among the big five origin categories: white (non-Hispanic presumed), Hispanic or Latine, African American or black, Asian, and American Indian (in order of size). I do so for two reasons. First, the Hispanic group, the second-largest ethno-racial population in the United States, is only partially identifiable on the basis of racial distinctiveness, and ethnic characteristics, such as names, language, and countries of origin, are required to complete its identification. Second, ethnicity and race are concepts on a spectrum, with a murky

the population—is presumed to entail profound and wide-ranging effects. These could range from its impact on the distribution of political power to a rising prominence of minority experiences in cultural domains like the movies.

For many whites, the current narrative about ineluctable demographic shift, ending in their minority status, congeals into a threatening vision about their place in America. At the extreme, their uneasiness about the future takes the form of what the *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow has described as “white extinction anxiety” and propels them into the embrace of white nationalism.¹ Political scientists who have analyzed the forces behind the startling and unanticipated 2016 election of Donald Trump as president argue that white “racial resentment,” stoked in part by the anxiety over massive demographic change and its implications for whites, was the most consequential among them. For many minority Americans, the same perception engenders optimism about the future and a hope that they will see the mainstream better reflect their group and its experiences.

Demographic data are playing a remarkable role in these developments. It is in fact rare for demographic data to receive so much

boundary between them. What seems like a racial distinction at one historical moment can evolve into an ethnic one at another.

I also abbreviate the complexity of some of these categories for purposes of exposition. By the definitions that the Census Bureau is required to use, the white category includes individuals whose family origins trace back to the Middle East or North Africa as well as to Europe; the American Indian category includes the native peoples of Alaska; and there is a separate Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander category, which I do not consider because of its small size (0.4 percent of the population). For clarification of these categories, see Office of Management and Budget 1997.

One other terminological note: I use “Hispanic” and “Latine” as equivalent ways of referring to the population of groups with origins in Latin America. I have selected the latter term as an acceptable way to avoid the masculine implication of the gendered term “Latino.” This solution originates with a movement in Latin America to diminish gendered language, and it is therefore linguistically consistent with a Romance language. Moreover, it does not have the vocal and orthographic awkwardness of another solution, “Latinx,” now common in North American academia.

public attention. Announcements by the Census Bureau, such as the 2015 press release reporting that the majority of children under the age of five are no longer white (according, I have to add, to the narrow definition of “white” employed by the census), receive wide publicity and are greeted with headlines such as “It’s Official: The US Is Becoming a Minority-Majority Nation” (this one in *US News & World Report*).² When the Public Religion Research Institute conducted its annual American Values Survey in 2018, it asked a representative sample of Americans:

As you may know, US Census projections show that by 2045, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and other mixed racial and ethnic groups will together be a majority of the population. Do you think the likely impact of this coming demographic change will be mostly positive or mostly negative?

Only a small percentage of respondents (4 percent) were unable to respond. The vast majority, in other words, were familiar enough with the idea to have an opinion, which incidentally was positive in the majority (except among whites, who were evenly divided).³

Yet there are powerful reasons to be skeptical about this demographic imagining of the present and the near future: it assumes a rigidity to racial and ethnic boundaries that has not been characteristic of the American experience with immigration. As a nation, we have been here before. A century ago, when immigration from southern and eastern Europe was at its zenith, bringing masses of southern Italian and Polish Catholics and eastern European Jews to Ellis Island, there was a spasm of near-hysteria in the white Protestant elite about the superior racial characteristics of native white Americans being submerged by the numbers and fertility of these inferiors. Reflecting ideas about eugenics widely discussed at the time, the patrician New Yorker Madison Grant wrote *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), decrying the pernicious racial impact of the new immigrants on what he viewed as America’s native Nordic stock. The introduction of IQ testing shortly before World War I seemed to confirm the inferiority of the new immigrants, many of whom appeared to be intellectually deficient.⁴ Yet the national

decline anticipated from the immigration of newcomers, who were held to be racially unlike established white Americans, failed to materialize.

The rigidity of ethno-racial lines is already being challenged by a robust development that is largely unheralded: a surge in the number of young Americans who come from mixed majority-minority families and have one white parent and one nonwhite or Hispanic parent. Today more than 10 percent of all babies born in the United States are of such mixed parentage; this proportion is well above the number of Asian-only children and not far below the number of black-only infants. This surge is a by-product of a rapid rise in the extent of ethno-racial mixing in families. What makes this phenomenon new is the social recognition now accorded to mixed ethno-racial origins as an independent status, rather than one that must be amalgamated to one group or another.

The book uses the rise of mixed backgrounds that span the minority-white divide as a lens through which to scrutinize and challenge the idea of an inevitable majority-minority society, envisioned by many Americans as one cleaved into two distinct parts with opposing interests, experiences, and viewpoints. As a first step, I show the crucial significance of the mixed group for census data that appear to herald a minority status for whites. Census ethno-racial classifications do not deal appropriately with mixed minority-white backgrounds. There is an interesting story behind this failure, which the book will tell. But the bottom line is this: for the critical public presentations of data, the Census Bureau classifies individuals who are reported as having both white and nonwhite ancestries as *not* white; my analyses for the book show that the great majority of all mixed Americans are therefore added to the minority side of the ledger. This classification decision has a profound effect on public perceptions of demographic change, but it does not correspond with the social realities of the lives of most mixed individuals, who are integrated with whites at least as much as with minorities. The census data thus distort contemporary ethno-racial changes by accelerating the decline of the white population and presenting as certain something that is no more than speculative—a future situation when

the summed counts of the American Indian, Asian, black, and Latine categories exceed the count of whites.

The reasons to be concerned about the widespread belief in a majority-minority future go far beyond demographic accuracy. The political impact has already been cited. Of broader significance is the role of the “majority-minority society” as a *narrative*: an account—often abbreviated in common understanding—about the ethno-racial changes taking place now and in the near future that shapes our perceptions of them and determines our fundamental understanding of American society and of its evolution in an era of large-scale immigration. The narrative most widely believed about the immigration past, overwhelmingly European in origin, is that the descendants of the immigrants were absorbed into the mainstream society, despite initial experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and denigration for alleged inferiority. This is an assimilation story. That narrative now collides with the perception, nourished by the majority-minority concept, of a stark and deep-seated cleavage between the currently dominant white majority and nonwhite minorities. That perception feeds a different narrative: that a contest along ethno-racial lines for social power (taking that term in its broadest sense) is intensifying. This collision of narratives in the public sphere is mirrored in academic debate—between the adherents of race theory (or critical race theory), currently the dominant perspective at American universities, and those who view ethnicity and race as more malleable and potentially reshaped by assimilatory processes.

The book addresses the conflict between these narratives. And by combining key ideas from apparently conflicting social-science theories, it seeks a more nuanced understanding of American society in the early twenty-first century. (The time span I have in mind extends to midcentury; past that point, too many unanticipated changes are likely to have taken place, clouding anyone’s ability to envision their cumulative impact.) Race theory, which has been mostly tested on the African American experience and is most relevant to groups that have been incorporated into American society by conquest, colonization, or enslavement, is in fact applicable to the new forms of ethno-racial mixing: I show evidence that individuals with black and

white parentage have a very different experience from other mixed persons and identify more strongly with the minority side of their backgrounds. However, many other mixed majority-minority Americans have everyday experiences, socioeconomic locations, social affiliations, and identities that do not resemble those of minorities. On the whole, these individuals occupy a liminal “in between,” but their social mobility and social integration with whites are indicative of an assimilation trajectory into the societal mainstream. In arriving at this conclusion, the book synthesizes new data analyses, based on such data sources as the American Community Survey and public use files of birth certificates, with the research record, both qualitative and quantitative, concerning individuals with mixed ethno-racial origins.

To understand better the larger significance of the growing subpopulation with mixed minority-white backgrounds, the book revisits its assimilation theory. Important for my argument is the twenty-first-century version of the theory, which envisions assimilation as a process of integrating into the mainstream society instead of joining the white group. This new version does not require erasure of all signs of ethno-racial origin.⁵ The mainstream—which is constituted by institutions, social milieus, and cultural spheres where the dominant group, whites at this moment in history, feels “at home”—is not closed off against others. Just as the white Protestant mainstream that prevailed from colonial times until the middle of the twentieth century evolved through the mass assimilation of Catholic and Jewish ethnics after World War II, the racially defined mainstream of today is changing, at least in some parts of the country, as a result of the inclusion of many nonwhite and mixed Americans.

As this discussion suggests, the theoretical exposition of mainstream assimilation must be coupled with a close examination of the assimilation past, especially the period of mass assimilation following the end of World War II. The justification for this examination is not the mistaken belief that assimilation today will replicate the patterns of the past, but rather the need to correct ideas about assimilation that have become distorted by one-dimensional understandings of that period as well as by the rhetorical tropes of anti-assimilation

theorizing. A deeper understanding reveals clues about what to look for in the present and what to expect in the near future.

The currently widespread understanding of white ethnic assimilation is racial in nature: the ethnics were assimilated when they were accepted as full-fledged whites.⁶ This understanding depicts assimilation into the mainstream as a homogenizing process. However, it is more accurate, I argue, to view the white ethnics' assimilation as diversifying the mainstream because, before the middle of the last century, religion had been a basis for the exclusion of Catholic and Jewish ethnics from a white Protestant mainstream; mass assimilation was accompanied by the acceptance of Judaism (in its non-ultra-Orthodox forms) and Catholicism as mainstream religions alongside Protestantism. The post-1945 mainstream society redefined itself as Judeo-Christian. We should understand the assimilation of today therefore as neither inherently excluding the descendants of the newest immigrants because they cannot become white nor requiring them to present themselves as if they were white. Instead, the mainstream can expand to accept a visible degree of racial diversity, as long as the shared understandings between individuals with different ethno-racial backgrounds are sufficient to allow them to interact comfortably. In this way, increasing participation in the mainstream society is associated with "deategorization," in the sense that the relationships among individuals in the mainstream are not primarily determined by categorical differences in ethno-racial membership. In colloquial terms, they treat each other by and large as individuals rather than as members of distinct ethno-racial groups.

My argument is that, for the most part, the new, or twenty-first-century, phenomenon of mixed minority-majority backgrounds is a sign of growing integration into the mainstream by substantial portions of the new immigrant groups, especially individuals with Asian and Hispanic origins. The mainstream integration of mixed individuals is signaled by such indicators as their high rates of marriage to whites. But of course, it is not simply the children from mixed families who are integrating; many of the nonwhite parents are doing so as well, and as will be shown, they are often settling with their families in integrated neighborhoods, where many whites

are also present. The mainstream does appear to be expanding and becoming more diverse, and the implications are potentially quite consequential. However, the impact of racism on Americans who are visibly of African descent is also consequential, and racism presumably also affects some portions of other groups, such as dark-skinned Hispanics. In addition, the expanding role of legal exclusions condemns unauthorized immigrants to the margins of the society and hinders their children.⁷

What will the growing diversity in the mainstream mean for its definitional character? In the recent past and even today, the mainstream has been equated with whiteness. One scenario, compatible with race theory, sees the mainstream expansion as essentially a whitening process that will ultimately leave the mainstream defined as it is now. More plausible in my view is that the mainstream in the more diverse regions of the country will come to be—or maybe already has been—perceived in multiracial and multicultural terms, especially as prominent individuals in these regions are increasingly drawn from a visibly wide set of origins; in other regions, the mainstream will remain heavily white, at least in the near future. A multiracial character for the mainstream could further expand access, including additional space for African Americans. However, mainstream expansion today is also consistent with high levels of average inequality among groups and with the exclusion of many nonwhites. The growing assimilation of some nonwhites is no reason to settle into complacency about the need to promote greater equality and inclusion.

The relatively modest magnitude of mainstream assimilation today compared to the sweeping assimilation of the descendants of European immigrants in the decades following the end of World War II highlights the dependence of assimilation processes on large-scale features of the societal context, economic and demographic. I discuss these within the framework “non-zero-sum assimilation,” a theory I develop concerning the mechanisms driving assimilation: social mobility, which produces parity with many individuals in the mainstream; the growth of amicable personal relationships with such individuals; and mainstream cultural change that elevates the

moral worth of minority individuals. It is the first mechanism that is most constrained today. In the post–World War II period, when the United States was briefly the preeminent global economic power, higher education and the occupational sectors it fed were expanded enormously. This expansion engendered non-zero-sum mobility on a mass scale for the second and third generations descended from the immigrants with previously stigmatized origins, such as those from Ireland, southern Italy, Poland, and Russia. (A claim made throughout the book is that assimilation is more extensive under conditions of large-scale non-zero-sum mobility, when upward mobility by minority-group members does not require downward mobility by some in the majority.) In the early twenty-first century, when economic inequality is much greater than it was in the middle of the twentieth century, the basis for significant non-zero-sum mobility that favors minorities is demographic rather than economic: with the aging and retirement of a large number of older, well-placed white workers, there are not enough younger whites to replace them. This process will play out most intensely during the coming two decades as the last of the large, heavily white baby-boom cohorts age out of work and civic leadership and many individuals with minority family backgrounds, including mixed ones, replace them. But contemporary assimilation is more selective: its magnitude—the extent to which it involves all parts of minority groups—will not match that of the earlier period.

In the last part of the book, then, I examine social policies that could enhance mainstream expansion today and also extend the option to more African Americans and others affected by severe racism. Prominent among these policies are those addressing high and growing economic inequality in the United States. The underlying rationale is that inequality throws sand in the gears of social mobility. Policies to reduce inequality will broadly improve opportunities, including for African Americans, but they will not by themselves blunt the severe and systemic racism that is evident in the distinctive trajectory of mixed individuals with black ancestry. Reparations have become a prominent part of the public discussion for redressing black-white inequality, and they need to be considered.

In addition, no discussion of the situation of black Americans can avoid the unique burdens imposed on them and their communities by mass incarceration. Finally, the defective legal statuses of many in the immigrant population—primarily but not exclusively unauthorized status—need to be rectified because we know that they handicap the next generation, even those born in the United States.

This book is the culmination of a decades-long effort to reinvigorate assimilation ideas, which have been criticized extensively for a bias in favor of the experiences of white immigrants from Europe and their descendants, and to demonstrate their continuing importance to the American story.⁸ I began in the 1970s and '80s, at a time when many commentators were arguing for the durability of the ethnicities that had crystallized out of the European immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My examination of the Italian American experience and of the sociological significance of ethnic identities among whites (which appeared simultaneously with Mary Waters's influential and similarly argued *Ethnic Options*) showed assimilation to be occurring on a massive scale even as ethnic symbolism retained some vitality. My collaboration with Victor Nee that resulted in *Remaking the American Mainstream*, published in 2003, reworked assimilation thinking to make it relevant for an America that is rapidly becoming more ethno-racially diverse because of immigration. My 2009 book, *Blurring the Color Line*, pointed to mechanisms, especially the non-zero-sum mobility created by demographic shift, that would promote an important degree of assimilation for nonwhites.⁹ The role of this book, then, is to produce the evidence that such assimilation is indeed taking place.

This demonstration of the continuing importance of assimilation patterns is intended to counter the imagined majority-minority future arising from the widely disseminated demographic data. This demographically inspired concept, which suggests a society riven along ethno-racial lines, stimulates perceptions of threat for many whites and contributes in this way to the very polarization it envisions. The argument of this book is not that whites will retain a numerical majority status, although I do not rule out such a possibility, but rather that mainstream expansion, which would meld

many whites, nonwhites, and Hispanics, holds out the prospect of a new kind of societal majority.

The book is intended to unfold in a series of logically arranged steps, like the unpacking of nested Russian dolls, to arrive at new insights about ethno-racial change in America. It begins with a puzzle: why, after the election of our first African American president, did the electorate swing to the opposite extreme and elect Donald Trump? Chapter 2, which lays out what we have learned about the 2016 election, underscores the critical importance of demographic “imaginings” among Americans and hence of the narratives and data about ethno-racial shifts in the population. The Trump victory utterly confounded the pre-election predictions based on polling and gave rise to a raft of political-science research in search of an explanation. In examining that research, the chapter highlights the “racial resentments” and acute sense of vulnerability of working-class whites as the critical factors. This analysis is supported by recent social-psychological research, which shows whites generally adopting more conservative political stances when confronted with scenarios of future demographic shift. However, the social-psychological research also shows that the white anxieties behind conservative reactions can be assuaged, opening the way to a consideration of alternative narratives about the American present and future.

The third chapter addresses the question: how do Americans arrive at ideas about ethno-racial change in their society? The notion that whites will become a numerical minority has been around at least since President Bill Clinton, in a 1997 speech, claimed that this would happen in a half-century. But the pronouncements more recently of what I call our “demographic data system” have been critical to Americans’ acceptance of this idea. It is certainly true that, in an era of large-scale immigration, various observers could have arrived at this notion and publicized it. Without the data and interpretations coming from the Census Bureau and other parts of this system, however, the idea would have lacked the imprimatur that gives it legitimacy.

The chapter reviews Census Bureau data and pronouncements about population change and the ways in which they have been taken

up by the mass media. A Census Bureau press release introducing the notion of a “majority-minority nation” about a decade ago was especially consequential. The chapter then explores the reactions to the census data from political and cultural commentators, from Pat Buchanan to Ezra Klein. The reactions on the right and the left are, not surprisingly, different: the right issues dire warnings about national decline, while the left exudes a confident sense of inevitability, combined with some degree of celebration of “the end of white America.” The chapter also considers white Americans’ everyday experiences with diversity, especially in their neighborhoods. I summarize the evidence about the sharply rising diversity in white neighborhoods over the last several decades and what we know about whites’ responses to it.

The fourth chapter examines how our demographic data system has produced the majority-minority prediction for the next several decades and also why, despite the critical innovation of multiple-race reporting in the 2000 Census, it has failed to call an equivalent attention to the surge of ethno-racial mixing in families. The chapter introduces the reader to the Census Bureau’s measurement of race and ethnicity and includes a brief tour of its history. The current questions and the construction of data from them are discussed, as are the bureaucratic, political, and legal constraints on census data, exemplified by the role of the Office of Management and Budget in developing standards for ethnic and racial data reporting. The chapter then brings into play the increasing extent of ethno-racial mixing in families, beginning with the steady rise in marriages across the major ethno-racial divisions. This mixing leads naturally to increases in the number of children with mixed backgrounds (whether formed through marriage or not); the great majority of them have one white and one minority parent. I present data from census data sets and birth certificates to demonstrate the rapid growth of mixed parentage among infants and the relative frequency of different ethno-racial combinations among them. The chapter concludes by examining how census data procedures have dealt with this momentous new development. For reasons I develop, those procedures have proven inadequate to give Americans an accurate understanding of

ethno-racial mixing in families and its implications for the future. I show, for example, that the group with mixed minority-white parentage is the pivot on which the outcomes of Census Bureau population projections depend; if we change our assumptions about its classification, the projected future looks quite different.

If this mixed group is demographically important, we need to understand where its members fit into American society. The fifth chapter presents a coherent if complex picture of the socioeconomic position, social affiliations, identities, and experiences of those from mixed minority-white families. It does so in part by using some original data analyses, along with a comprehensive synthesis of the research literature on mixed Americans, including both qualitative and quantitative studies.

This picture is differentiated by the ethno-racial origin of the minority parent, and large differences can be seen in the starting points for mixed individuals during infancy. The strongest contrast lies between those with Asian and white backgrounds and those with black and white ones. The former are raised mostly by married-couple families that have high incomes because both parents are highly educated; the children grow up in suburban neighborhoods with many homeownership white residents. As adults, they mix easily with whites and frequently marry them; their fluid identities often shift between mixed and white. Qualitative research indicates that Asian-white young adults do not feel a strong distinction from whites. Black-white children are raised by families, often headed by single parents, that face more economic challenges. They are not as concentrated in urban neighborhoods as black-only children are, but they have experiences similar to theirs with the police. Although they tend, as adults, to identify with the black side of their background, they not infrequently marry whites.

Other large groups with mixed majority-minority backgrounds seem positioned in between whites and minority groups. This is true of the largest such group, those from families with one white (non-Hispanic) and one Hispanic parent. But in some fundamental ways, such as educational attainment, identity patterns, social affiliations, and marriage tendencies, the members of other mixed

groups appear closer to the white side of their background than to the minority side.

Chapter 6 provides the conceptual, or theoretical, and historical background for an interpretation of the significance of mixing that is advanced in the seventh chapter. I review the two bodies of relevant social-science theories, race and assimilation theories. I do not hide that I rely more on assimilation ideas than on those from race theory. But in order to avoid the false simplicities of an abstract portrait of change, the book delves into history—specifically the history of the post-World War II mass assimilation of the so-called white ethnics—to look for clues about the current nature of assimilation and to reveal the real-life messiness of assimilation processes, which generally do not produce integration into the mainstream in a seamless way. This part of the chapter develops a theory to explain the midcentury mass assimilation, based on social-psychological principles; the idea of non-zero-sum mobility, which mitigates ethno-racial competition for valued statuses, plays a central role in this theory. As noted earlier, the historical examination also revises fundamentally the currently reigning depiction of that assimilation in the whiteness account, for example, by highlighting the ways in which the mainstream became more diverse and had its identity altered as a consequence of mass assimilation.

Based on the ideas developed in chapter 6 and the takeaways from assimilation history, the first part of chapter 7 develops an understanding of how large-scale assimilation can be occurring in an economically stressed time by applying to the present the non-zero-sum assimilation theory, which has three main elements (status uplift, social proximity to whites, and moral elevation). The chapter, for example, presents evidence that the patterns to be expected from non-zero-sum mobility created by demographic shift are occurring: they are evident in the penetration of more individuals from minority backgrounds or mixed minority-white ones into the upper reaches of the labor force and in the growing diversity of higher education, even at its most elite levels. This mobility particularly benefits the groups that have grown extensively through immigration since the 1960s. The second part of the chapter argues that these patterns should be

understood as an expansion of the mainstream and are associated with greater openness to nonwhites and Hispanics than in the past. At this point, I consider how the character of the mainstream may be altered by this openness, contrasting the idea of assimilation as whitening with the ongoing mainstream diversification.

The eighth chapter considers how assimilation processes could be facilitated by social policy, and it concentrates on three major barriers to assimilation: the high and growing overall level of economic inequality, which is inhibiting social mobility; systematic racism, which causes groups like African Americans to be “underserved” by assimilation processes; and defective legal status, which affects a large part of the immigrant population and hinders the second generation as well.

In the ninth and concluding chapter, I summarize the various conceptual strands and empirical findings and then return to the opening theme of narratives for understanding demographic change and their political ramifications. Like other Western countries, the United States needs continued large-scale immigration to retain its vitality, but the current narrative about the changes wrought by immigration has polarizing political consequences, especially for the white majority, which will remain the dominant political group nationally well past midcentury. The United States—again like other Western immigration societies—is in need of a new narrative, one that is less threatening to the majority and that, at the same time, allows immigrants and their children to become a part of the mainstream “us” without complete abandonment of their distinctiveness. It is my hope in writing this book that ideas about mainstream assimilation can provide the material for fashioning such a narrative.

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