Sounds Canadian
Languages and Cultures in Multi-Ethnic Society

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THE PROCESS OF MAINTENANCE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY: 
THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

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Very broadly, ethnic identity may be defined as commitment to a social grouping of common ancestry, existing within a larger society of different ancestral origins, and characterized by sharing of some common values, behavioural patterns or symbols different from those of the larger society. Defining ethnic identity in this sense allows for distinguishing a variety of ways in which a person may be committed to an ethnic group. This, in turn, makes possible a distinction of types or forms of ethnic identity. Differentiation of forms of ethnic identity is necessary if we are to understand fruitfully the process of its maintenance. Much of the literature on ethnic communities and their persistence makes the study of ethnic group maintenance as a process difficult because of its failure to deal with the problem of forms of ethnic identity.

Essentially, the problem of maintenance of ethnic identity is the problem of retaining some form of commitment to an ethnic group over the span of generations. The conventional approach to this question has been by means of (a) the concept of assimilation and (b) the various factors which either hasten or retard it. The concept of assimilation itself, largely due to Milton Gordon's efforts, has been submitted to a somewhat moot division into structural and cultural assimilation. Analytically, the division is clear enough. Reformulating it a little, it can be said that structural assimilation, also referred to as integration, means inclusion of members of an ethnic group into the role and group system of society. This can be either in the area of secondary or primary relationships, that is, either those of the instrumental (economic, occupational and similar) character or those of friendship and the family and community. Cultural assimilation, on the other hand, is the opposite of inclusion. It is the internalization of the overt or covert patterns of behaviour characteristic of the larger society by the members of the ethnic group.

Useful as this distinction may be in assessing the type of inclusion or exclusion of members of ethnic groups in the larger society, the problem with it is the difficulty in assessing empirically how precisely these two forms of assimilation vary independently. There is enough literature to support Gordon's argument that the two forms of assimilation are not necessarily conditioned by one another, that is, that a member of a racial group, an immigrant or his son can become culturally assimilated, yet
structurally remain un-integrated. Studies of Negroes, Jews, Italians and others in the United States have shown this.¹

On the other hand, policy oriented literature upholding the idea of cultural pluralism has claimed that structural assimilation or integration also can take place without necessarily implying full cultural assimilation.² In any case, many empirical studies, although not done with the aim of testing the concepts of assimilation, leave the reader uncertain as to the empirical applicability of the distinction.³ This is especially true of the data on the second and third generation Ukrainians presented in a recent study by B. Bociurkiw.⁴ All this does not mean that the distinction between the two types of assimilation is of no use. It does have to be rethought.

One attempt to understand the factors slowing down or speeding up assimilation have been the theoretical formulations dealing with what has been called "ethnic institutional completeness"⁵ and similar to it "ethnic community closure".⁶ Breton's carefully collected data led him to conclude that the more institutionally complete an ethnic group is, the more members of that group will tend to contain their interpersonal, informal relations within the group and the less will they develop personal contacts with members of the society at large. Also associated with this is language orientation and the type of occupation predominantly held by the members of the ethnic community. That is, ethnic communities with a high degree of institutional completeness tended to have a high proportion of persons ignorant of the language of the dominant society and a high proportion of persons engaged in manual occupations.

If we relate these findings to the question of maintenance of ethnic identity, it can be said that institutional completeness of an ethnic group, by reinforcing ethnic interpersonal ties, functions as a mechanism of maintenance of ethnic identity. In other words, the more institutions an ethnic group has, the more organized it is, the greater its chance of maintaining its identity.

Max Weber's argument of community closure as applied by Neuwirth to ethnic groups seems to be similar. As translated by Neuwirth, community closure refers to the process by which community members, once they have formed communal relationships, tend to monopolize economic, political and/or social advantages. This, however, does not mean that a closed community is necessarily the dominant community. Closure, states Neuwirth, may be attained by communities located at various positions along the stratification continuum.

When applied to ethnic communities, the assumption made in this concept is that ethnic community closure, if nothing else, functions to attain or maintain at least a positively esteemed form of ethnic identity.

I have no argument with either the institutional completeness theory or the ethnic community closure theory. Both theories direct our attention to important categories of factors involved in the process of maintenance of ethnic identity, one referring to interpersonal relations, the other to power, privilege or prestige. But it may be legitimately asked, how about those whose interpersonal relations tend to be outside of the ethnic com-
munity, or those whose language of discourse has become that of the larger society? Or again, excluding for the moment the Weberian notion of ethnic honour, how about those members of ethnic groups who do not maximize, or try to maximize, ethnic monopoly on opportunities for increasing status?

The implicit logical answer would be that they are being assimilated, be it culturally or structurally, into the surrounding society at whatever level of the social stratification ladder this may be taking place. In other words, they are experiencing a loss of ethnic identity.

This answer, however, is not satisfying, especially in the face of the evidence of the second, the third, or the fourth ethnic generations whose conversational language is English, whose involvement in ethnic institutions may be minimal, whose opportunities are not related to ethnic boundaries, yet who show interest and feelings for their ancestral heritage. Important as the studies of factors favouring or impeding the maintenance of ethnic identity are, they can be meaningful only if they are made to bear on the different forms of commitment to ethnic cultures, i.e., different forms of ethnic identity.

Methodologically, therefore, what seems to be needed and what this paper will attempt to do in an outline form is the following: (1) The problems of retention or loss of ethnic identity will be defined as a process in which the various forms of commitment to ethnic cultures can be recognized and seen as emerging, disappearing and reemerging, as it were, at different times, depending on specific conditions; (2) Among the conditions to be considered should be both the structural and cultural state of the ethnic groups under consideration at any given time, and the structural and cultural state of the societal system as a whole at the same time. The times involved here should be both past and present; (3) Relative to the conditions, both within the ethnic group and the society at large, the process of maintenance of ethnic identity should be related to other processes within society, especially those of social mobility and solidarity formation.

Too often it has been assumed, both popularly and by sociologists, that the question of ethnic identity is, on the one hand, a temporary question, i.e., that in time all “ethnics” assimilate and the ethnic group boundaries disappear, and on the other hand, that it is primarily the problem of the ethnic groups themselves rather than the problem of the system and the processes inherent in the society at large. Neither of these assumptions can be justified.

Structural Context of North American Ethnic Groups

In both Canada and the United States, ethnic groups are constituent groups; they are part of the basic structure of society. In European societies, with several notable exceptions, ethnic groups are more or less peripheral to the structure of society. It is unrealistic, for example, to speak of Canadian or American higher or lower classes without any reference to ethnic groups. It is never simply upper or lower class, it is upper or
lower "ethclass". For this reason the problems of social integration of North American societies are inherently bound up with the problems of ethnic groups.

Both Canada and the United States have developed a form of pluralism; the forms, however, differ. As a rule, Americans have been reluctant to give any legal recognition to ethnic groups. In Canada, the precedent for such recognition has been established early, in particular by the Quebec Act of 1774. The role of the governments in regard to the immigrants has also differed. The Canadian government has had a much more direct and active role in both recruiting and bringing over immigrants than did the American government.

The Canadian variety of pluralism, however, should in no way be seen as a policy of extending equal opportunities to all ethnic groups. In fact the contrary is more true. The Quebec Act itself can be seen as yet another case of the British pattern of "indirect rule" over its colonies, a pattern followed in the British African and Asian colonies. According to this pattern, a policy of non-assimilation made possible a more rational yet more effective control over potential tensions arising from cultural differences by containing the demands of the differing cultural groups within the bounds of established autonomies. Thus the preservation of native or other cultures ensured that equal rights would not be extended to them. As the historian A. G. Dorland put it, the Quebec Act "did achieve its main objective: it kept Canada British by allowing it to remain French-Canadian".

Structural and ideological factors within ethnic groups themselves have contributed also to an uneven opportunity structure among other ethnic groups. The most important among these factors have been the occupational and educational background of the immigrants and the values related to achievement motivation.

All these variables, originating both in the core society and within ethnic groups, have molded a setting for ethnic histories in Canada and the United States to which the term pluralism can be applied only in a very qualified manner. Specifically I would call it pluralism of ethnic stratification, implying an unequal access to both structural and cultural opportunities.

Patterns of the Ethnic Identity Maintenance Process

It is in the context of such conditions that the process of maintenance of ethnic identity has to be considered. Three patterns of the process can be singled out: (1) pattern of "transplantation" of the old culture, (2) the rebellion pattern, and (3) returning or rediscovery pattern. The assumption made is that these patterns are discernible under the conditions of pluralism of ethnic stratification.

The pattern of "transplantation" refers essentially to the attempts by the immigrants to reestablish and follow the same institutional ways which they have known before arrival in the new country. It is the problem primarily of the first generation, i.e., the immigrant generation. It is the
process of building ethnic ghettos, of establishing relations with people whose sympathy and loyalty can be assumed. Transplanted things, however, never grow the same. The transplantation pattern is not really a continuation of the old ways. Reestablishment or establishment of relations even with persons sharing the same heritage under different conditions of existence cannot result in simply continuing the old ways. Even in rather isolated areas the characteristics of the new society impinge on the immigrant. In a colourful style Oscar Handlin has described how the new church built by the peasant immigrants in the U.S. has never "felt the same", and how the old village and regional affiliations were never adequate for a group life full of "in-fellow feeling". On the other hand, the organizational life of the first Ukrainians in Point Douglas, Manitoba, as described by Marunchak, was full of activities never engaged in by the villagers in their former country.

Glazer has pointed out that in the New World many first generation Italians and Polish have come to feel Italian or Polish for the very first time, thus establishing a type of ethnic identity which they have never had before.

Nevertheless, the essential features of the life style and the organizational patterns have remained, most of them retained from the old culture without much reflection or critical self-awareness.

It is the rebellion pattern, characteristic especially of the members of the second generation immigrants, that represents a heightened awareness of one's own cultural and social background. This type of self-awareness comes about as a consequence of psychological confrontation with the cultural ways and relational structures of the larger society. One result of such confrontation is either embarrassment, dissatisfaction with, or shame of one's own parental patterns and expectations. The reaction may be a conscious rejection of one's past, or it may be an overidentification with the dominant society, or still another form of reaction may be a commitment to ideologies or utopias involving some ideal patterns of universal justice or love. Identification with such actual movements may follow. The rebellion pattern, of course, is not necessarily unique to the ethnic communities. The concept may be applicable to any generational relationship.

The "returning" or rediscovering pattern is the most interesting and significant if we think of the process of maintenance of ethnic identity in terms of a longer span across generations. It seems to be most applicable to persons who have no confrontational problems deriving from the cultural differences of their parents. Both they themselves and their parents might have gone through the process of socialization within the culture of the dominant society and may be anywhere on the scale of social status. It can, however, be also applicable to members of the second ethnic generations who have gone through the process of socialization in the culture of the dominant society and who may or may not have gone through the rebellion pattern. The essential consideration here is that there are persons who have gone through the basic process of socialization not in the culture of
their ancestors, and who might have experienced much social mobility within the larger society but whose feeling of identity with their ancestral group has actually developed rather than decreased.

The only way to attempt to explain this phenomenon is to see the pattern not in any literal sense of the word "returning", that is, picking up where some forgotten grandfather left off, but in the sense of rediscovering one's ancestral past as something with new meaning. The turn to the past is therefore symbolic. Either some elements of the heritage or perhaps the total historical heritage itself comes to be glorified, i.e., the past becomes transfigured. This may or may not be accompanied by rejection of the values of the societal culture. Empirical research is badly needed here. What is significant in this respect is that there is a process of selection of items from the cultural past and even relatively few items, such as ethnic folk art, music, can become symbols of ethnic identity. Furthermore, when recourse to the past is made, it seems to be a recourse to the remote past rather than the immediate past, e.g., the link with Africa on the part of the Blacks, the recourse to ancient Hebrew by the Jews, to ancient art forms by the Indians, etc. The remote past signifying primordial origins, the roots as it were, is a better symbol of identity than the immediate past.

**Forms of Commitment to Ethnic Cultures and Factors of Identity Maintenance**

The patterns involved in the process of ethnic identity maintenance indicate at least two different forms of commitment to ethnic cultures, "traditional" and "symbolic". It is in relation to these forms of ethnic cultural commitment that the factors favouring or impeding assimilation have to be considered. Thus institutional completeness or community closure among those committed to their culture in a traditional "transplanted" way, may not necessarily mean maintenance of ethnic identity in the long run because it would exclude those who, though assimilated into the dominant culture, have an interest in their ethnic background. At the same time, institutional completeness may evoke, especially among the younger generation, the pattern of rebellion against the ethnic group.

On the other hand, a degree of ethnic community closure or institutional completeness among those whose commitment to the ethnic culture is symbolic, the "rediscoverers", may be precisely a condition of long-range identity maintenance of an ethnic group within the larger society. This, of course, may alienate those committed to the ethnic culture in a traditional manner, thus cutting the rediscoverers away from a potential source of their symbolic enrichment.

Turning the argument around, it can be said that institutional completeness may be functional for the traditionalists but dysfunctional for the rediscoverers, since the ethnic rediscovery itself is in some way tied up with their participation in the institutions of the larger society. By the same token, it can be argued that the pattern of rebellion against the ethnic group and ethnic identity is in the long run potentially functional for the
maintenance of this identity since it removes the person from a purely traditional commitment to his ethnic background and by bringing him closer to the larger society may increase, let us say, his son's chance of becoming a rediscoverer.

In any case, the argument suggests that the maintenance of ethnic identity, as originally defined in this paper, depends primarily upon emergence of rediscoverers rather than traditionalists. Two questions which arise from this premise are: (1) What type and degree of symbolism is necessary for a person or a group to maintain its ethnic identity?; and (2) What are the dynamics which produce the so-called rediscoverers in ethnic communities?

The number of ethnic symbols necessary to maintain ethnic identity seems to vary among ethnic groups. It appears that some groups, like the Jews, for example, may require relatively few symbols, whereas others, like many Slavic groups, may require a good number. Without empirical data it is impossible to answer this question in any satisfactory manner. Two types of symbols, however, seem to be important for most ethnic groups, namely, ethnic language and ethnic endogamy. Although all groups place a value on both means of strengthening ethnic ties, some consider one more significant in preserving their ethnic identity than the other. Jews, for example, seem to place a much higher value on endogamy than on language as a means of ethnic identity maintenance. Ukrainians, on the other hand, place a very high premium on language. In both cases other patterns, important as they may be to the ethnic group, tend to become auxiliary symbols. Relation to the country of origin and the events taking place in it may also become a significant symbol of ethnic identity in its own right. Perhaps the minimum symbolism would be simply acknowledgement of common ancestry.

*Structural Sources of Ethnic "Rediscovery"*

Awareness of one's own ancestry remains a basic mechanism in the ethnic rediscovery process. However, the dynamic factors involved in ethnic rediscovery in North American societies are located primarily in the structure of these societies themselves. The structure of ethnic stratification and its concomitant occupational, economic and political competition, all influence one's awareness of ancestry.12 The rediscovery pattern may emerge when members of ethnic groups begin to realize that cultural assimilation is indeed not sufficient to achieve their economic and/or social aspirations, but that owing to the community closure of the dominant groups, their opportunities are limited. They may have the qualifications relative to the positions to which they aspire, yet be excluded from them because they are identified as members of an ethnic group. Under such conditions a degree of ethnic community closure may enable the members of the group to achieve, through concerted group action, an access to the political, social and economic opportunity structure which they, as individuals, would be unable to attain. There is some evidence to show that this may
be true especially when members of ethnic groups have already been mobile in the economic structure of society. Social mobility, therefore, may produce ethnic rediscoverers and thus stimulate rather than stifle the process of ethnic identity maintenance. This is one reason why the question of multiculturalism, ethnic rights and group civil rights is raised today not by the immigrant groups, but by the established ethnic communities.

An analysis of Canadian census data on occupations suggests that there may be an order in which ethnic groups enter the structure of society over a period of time involving two or more generations. The first stage, embracing the first and to some extent the second ethnic generations, involves filling positions which assure little occupational mobility. The second stage, embracing perhaps primarily the second generation, is that of assimilating into the occupational mobility structure of society, i.e., filling positions which have a promise of advancement. The third stage, involving perhaps primarily the third ethnic generation, is the stage of mobility into positions of influence or power. This may be interpreted as a reach by an ethnic group for the rights of the establishment. Studies referred to above suggest that the ethnic rediscovery pattern may appear precisely between the second and the third stage.

On another level, contemporary North American societies have a deep-rooted problem of identity. Instead of inducing strong feelings of social solidarity, they tend to produce the opposite, feelings of social alienation. Search for personal identity in an alienating society is closely related to the rediscovery of ethnic identity and search for the former often results in the latter. Meaningful definition of the ego can take place only in terms of larger solidarity groupings. Since one's ancestry is a natural link to solidarity groups, search for psychological identity prevalent in our society is a significant source of emergence of ethnic rediscovery.

This is especially relevant to the contemporary Canadian attempts to develop both national identity and national unity. Northrop Frye, significantly not a sociologist, has aptly pointed out that the two goals are quite different things and in Canada they are perhaps more different than anywhere else. As he states, "identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling." We should add that identity has also a dimension whereby one relates to his ancestors either in a traditional manner, in which their ways are simply a precedent, or in a symbolic manner, in which their ways, or only some of their ways, become a legacy.

Frye goes on to say that "the tension between [the] political sense of unity and the imaginative sense of locality is the essence of whatever the word Canadian means. Once the tension is given up and the two elements of unity and identity are confused or assimilated to each other, we get the two endemic diseases of Canadian life. Assimilating identity to unity produces the empty gestures of cultural nationalism; assimilating unity to identity produces the kind of provincial isolation which is now called separatism."
The problem of developing a Canadian national identity is that it is difficult to develop a unified sense of Canadian history. In the absence of a unified tradition, it is difficult to rediscover cultural elements of the past which are common to all ethnic and regional groups and not predominantly associated with only one group. There is not enough of the common and shared remote past from which to draw viable symbols. Thus the search for Canadian identity engenders by its nature an awareness of ethnic and local identities. It can be said that conscious promotion of Canadian identity will contribute to further emergence of ethnic rediscoverers.

The policy objective may well be an articulation rather than an elimination of the tension between a sense of unity and the sense of identity. The consequences of this tension, however, must also be clearly understood. One of the most significant consequences is the pressure exerted on the system of law, inasmuch as the law can be said to be the medium through which intergroup tensions are managed. From the legal perspective this question may very well be phrased in terms of group rights versus individual rights. The sociological analyst, however, will do well if he understands this as an inherent societal process.

Notes


2 See: H. M. Kallen, “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot” in The Nation (February 18 and 25, 1915); L. B. Berkson, Theories of Americanization: A Critical Study with Special References to the Jewish Group (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1920); P. Yuzyk, Ukrainian Canadians: Their Place and Role in Canadian Life (Toronto: Ukrainian Canadian Business and Professional Federation, 1967).


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