Assimilation's quiet tide

RICHARD D. ALBA

ASSIMILATION has become America's dirty little secret. Although once the subject of avid discussion and debate, the idea has fallen into disrepute, replaced by the slogans of multiculturalism. At best, assimilation is considered of dubious relevance for contemporary minorities, who are believed to want to remain outside the fabled "melting pot" and to be, in any event, not wholly acceptable to white America.

However, assimilation was, and is, a reality for the majority of the descendants of earlier waves of immigration from Europe. Of course, it does have its varieties and degrees. Among Americans descended from the immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, assimilation is better viewed as a direction, rather than an accomplished end state.

Assimilation need not imply the obliteration of all traces of ethnic origins, nor require that every member of a group be assimilated to the same degree. That ethnic communities continue to exist in many cities and that many individuals identify
with their ethnic ancestry do not indicate that assimilation is a myth. What, then, does assimilation mean when applied to American ethnic groups derived from European immigration?

It refers, above all, to long-term processes that have whittled away at the social foundations for ethnic distinctions. These processes have brought about a rough parity of opportunities to attain such socioeconomic goods as educational credentials and prestigious jobs, loosened the ties between ethnicity and specific economic niches, diminished cultural differences that serve to signal ethnic membership to others and to sustain ethnic solidarity, shifted residence away from central-city ethnic neighborhoods to ethnically intermixed suburbs, and, finally, fostered relatively easy social intermixing across ethnic lines, resulting ultimately in high rates of ethnic intermarriage and ethnically mixed ancestry.

The assimilation associated with these outcomes should not be viewed as imposed upon resistant individuals seeking to protect their cultural identities—a common image of assimilation in recent, largely negative, discourse—nor as self-consciously embraced by individuals seeking to disappear into the mainstream (though, in both instances, there may be some who fit the description).

Rather, it is, in general, the perhaps unintended, cumulative byproduct of choices made by individuals seeking to take advantage of opportunities to improve their social situations. For many white ethnics, these opportunities opened especially in the period following World War II, due to more favorable attitudes towards groups such as Jews and Italians, the expansion of higher education and middle-class and upper-middle-class employment, and the mushrooming growth of housing in suburban communities.

The decision to make use of these opportunities sometimes has greater impact on the following generations than on the one responsible for them. When socially mobile families for-sake the old neighborhood, where the stamp of ethnic ways on everyday life could be taken for granted, for a suburb, it is the children who grow up in a multi-ethnic, or even non-ethnic, environment.
ASSIMILATION'S QUIET TIDE

What's in a name

The rising tide of assimilation is illustrated by data from the most recent U.S. census (1990). A first sign is given by responses to the ancestry question, which appeared for the first time in the 1980 census. From the 1980 to the 1990 census, there were surprising changes in the way ancestries were reported. In contrast to the racial- and Hispanic-origin data collected by the census, the distributions of responses across European-ancestry categories underwent sharp alterations, which appear to correlate strongly with the specific ancestry examples offered on the census questionnaire. These ancestry examples were listed immediately below the question, and their influence on the resulting responses implies that many whites are suggestible when it comes to the way they describe their ancestry.

For instance, in 1980, "English" was among the first examples given, and 49.6 million Americans claimed English ancestry; in 1990, it was omitted from the list of examples, and the number who identified themselves as of English ancestry fell to 32.7 million, a decline of one-third. Similarly, in 1990, German and Italian were the first two ancestry examples given; though both were also listed in 1980, their positions were not as prominent. Both ancestry groups increased in number by about 20 percent between the two censuses, an increase substantially larger than that for European-ancestry categories in general. Such shifts suggest that ethnic ancestry is not a firmly anchored self-concept for many Americans, and alert us to the need to take ancestry data with a dose of caution, for the "Germans" and "Italians" of 1990 have changed in unknown ways from the "Germans" and "Italians" of 1980.

Increasing socioeconomic parity

Historically, one of the most important moorings of ethnicity has been the concentration of different ethnic groups in specific socioeconomic strata. This brings the members of an ethnic group together by circumstances other than ethnicity and gives them common material and other interests arising from their shared situations. As Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan explained in their seminal book, Beyond the
Table 1a
Educational attainment by ethnic ancestry—men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Ancestry</th>
<th>Cohort born 1956-1965</th>
<th>Cohort born 1916-1925</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% attended college</td>
<td>% completed college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% completed bachelor's degree</td>
<td>% attended college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All non-Hisp. white</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solely British</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All southern and</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastern European</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Melting Pot,* “to name an occupational group or a class is very much the same thing as naming an ethnic group.”

However, in recent years, there has been a growing and impressive convergence in the average socioeconomic opportunities for members of white ethnic groups. Convergence here means that the disadvantages that were once quite evident for some groups of mainly peasant origins in Europe, such as the Italians, have largely faded, and their socioeconomic attainments increasingly resemble, if not even surpass, those of the average white American.

This phenomenon is quite demonstrable for education (a convenient indicator because its level is, for the great majority, fixed by the age of 25), but it is hardly limited to this sphere. Table 1 presents the educational attainments of younger and older cohorts for the major European-Ancestry categories. The data compiled in the table are limited to “non-Hispanic whites” (a population overwhelmingly of European ancestry) and to individuals born in the United States, thus avoiding any confounding with the characteristics of immigrants themselves. Though the data cannot tell us about the quality of education received, the evidence of convergence is strong.

To evaluate changes, two comparison groups are presented: one contains all non-Hispanic whites and the other individuals whose ancestry is solely from the British Isles (exclusive of
In the case of each ancestry category, individuals are included in the tabulations regardless of whether their ancestry is solely or partly from the category. Limiting tabulations to individuals with ancestry exclusively from one category would, in effect, eliminate one of the important mechanisms of assimilation—growing up in an ethnically mixed family.

The groups from southern and eastern Europe are often regarded as the acid test of assimilation because of the relative recency of their arrival and the prominence of their ethnicity in American cities. For the men of these groups who were born between 1916 and 1925, moderate disadvantages are evident when they are compared to the average non-Hispanic white or to men of German, Irish, and French ancestries; the disadvantage appears more substantial when compared to men of exclusively British ancestry. For instance, only a quarter to a third of Italian and Polish men attended

Table 1b
Educational attainment by ethnic ancestry—women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Ancestry</th>
<th>Cohort born 1956-1965</th>
<th>Cohort born 1916-1925</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% attended</td>
<td>% completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solely British</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All southern and eastern European</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

college, compared to almost half of the British men. About one in eight Italians and Poles completed bachelor's degrees, compared to nearly one in four British men.

In the cohort born between 1956 and 1965 (whose education was largely complete by the time of the 1990 census), the southern and eastern Europeans have just about pulled even with the British men and are ahead of the average white and the men of other northern- and western-European origins. The figures for southern and eastern Europeans in general and for Poles may be affected by the extraordinary accomplishments of Jewish men (who are nevertheless minorities of these categories), but the same argument cannot be made in the case of the Italians.

The process of convergence is also quite striking among women. For predominantly rural immigrant groups, like the Italians and Poles, the education of daughters was of secondary importance compared to the education of sons. In the older cohort, British women had rates of college attendance and graduation more than twice those of their Italian and Polish contemporaries. This disparity has been largely eradicated in the younger cohort: Italian and Polish women are slightly behind British women in college attendance and graduation but tied with, if not slightly ahead of, the average non-Hispanic white woman as well as those of German, Irish, and French ancestries. The younger women in the general southern- and eastern-European category have above-average educational attainments that are similar to those of British women; this parity represents a marked improvement over their situation in the older cohort.

**Decline of European mother tongues**

Declines in overt cultural differences are a second component of assimilatory change. In census data, these are measurable in terms of the languages spoken in the home. Communication in a mother tongue marks a social boundary, which includes those who share the same ethnic origin and can speak its language and excludes all others. In addition, many aspects of ethnic culture that are embedded in a mother tongue are diminished or lost as exposure and fluency wane.

All available evidence reveals a powerful pattern of conver-
Table 2
Language at home by ethnic ancestry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Cohort born 1976-1985 % speak other than English</th>
<th>Cohort born 1916-1925 % speak other than English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All non-Hisp. white</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All southern and eastern European</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


assimilation's quiet tide

sion to English monolingualism within three generations, from which only a small minority of any group escapes (a pattern first established by the sociologist Calvin Veltman). Consequently, the use in the home of European mother tongues (other than Spanish), and even exposure to them, have dropped off quite precipitously among those with southern- and eastern-European ancestries. Many older members of these groups spoke these languages in the immigrant homes and communities where they grew up. Data collected by the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey in the late 1970s show that three-quarters of southern- and eastern-European ethnics born in the United States before 1930 grew up in homes where a language other than English was spoken.

The situation for younger members of these and other groups, as depicted in the 1990 census, is presented in Table 2 (which omits the English-speaking ethnic categories). The younger cohort contains individuals who were between the ages of five and fourteen in 1990 (the census does not record the language of children under the age of five). In general, 95 percent or more of the children in each ethnic category speak only English at home. There are scarcely differences to be noted among the categories, except perhaps for the slightly higher percentage of German children who speak English only.

Speaking a mother tongue at home is more common among the older members of these groups. Germans are still an exception, testifying to the deep impact of wartime hostility on the survival of German culture in the United States. For the Italians, Poles, and other southern and eastern Europeans,
about 20 percent of their older members continue to speak a mother tongue, presumably on a daily basis. The figure is nearly as high for the French. Of course, still higher percentages spoke mother tongues during their childhoods. A major transition in language is evidently underway.

Qualifiers, however, should not be overlooked here. Perhaps fluency in a language is not required for it to serve an ethnic purpose; the use of words and phrases from a mother tongue, interspersed in English conversation, can signal an ethnic loyalty to others. This sort of knowledge cannot be measured from census data, but it does seem plausible that, where languages cease to be everyday means of communication, knowledge of words and phrases will drop off, too. Also, it is impossible to measure from census data the number of individuals who acquire a mother tongue through schooling or other formal instruction. Yet, given the generally sorry record of Americans’ mastery of foreign languages, one would not want to depend too much on this source for cultural support.

The declining ethnic neighborhood

Educational and occupational mobility and language acculturation, combined with the potent catalyst of competition with racial and new immigrant minorities over urban turf, have spurred residential changes. These have brought many white ethnics out of inner-city ethnic neighborhoods and into suburban settings, where ethnic residential concentrations tend to be diluted, if they exist at all. As a result of the continued visibility of surviving ethnic neighborhoods, some of which have become meccas for those seeking an “authentic” ethnic experience, the magnitude and implications of residential shifts are less appreciated than they should be.

In depicting residential shifts, I will switch from the trends in aggregate national census samples to the changes in a single but special geographic context, the Greater New York metropolitan region. This broad swath of cities and suburbs, covering 23 densely settled counties stretching from the Hudson Valley and Long Island in New York to the New Jersey shore, was home to 17 million people in 1990. Examining residential patterns in a single region avoids the risk of decontextualizing residential situations and losing sight of their location in rela-
tion to ethnic communities. No doubt due to the New York region's historic role as a gateway for immigrants, white ethnic communities continue to play a visible role in its ethnic geography. If such communities are important anywhere, they are sure to be so here.

Three large groups—Germans, Irish, and Italians—are used to trace residential patterns. Each has between two and three million members in the region, according to both 1980 and 1990 census data, and has figured in significant ways in the region's ethnic neighborhoods in the past. However, based on their histories and the results of past investigations (such as Beyond the Melting Pot), the Germans could be expected to be the least residentially distinctive (i.e., with the fewest ethnic areas), while the Italians should be the most.

In fact, all of these groups are now found mainly in the suburban parts of the region, where ethnic residential concentrations are demonstrably thinner (though not nonexistent). By 1980, the Germans and Irish were already disproportionately located in suburbs: roughly three-quarters of both were outside central cities, compared to two-thirds of all non-Hispanic whites (but just one-quarter of Hispanics and nonwhites). Moreover, in suburbia, the residential distributions of the Germans and Irish are barely distinguishable from that of other non-Hispanic whites. In other words, these groups are residentially intermixed.

The Italians present a different, but more dynamic, picture. In 1980, they were slightly less likely to be found in suburbs than the average white (64 percent versus 66 percent), but during the 1980s their numbers in large cities fell while rising in the suburbs. By 1990, 70 percent resided in suburbs. While they were still not as suburbanized as the Germans and Irish, they were more so than the average non-Hispanic white. For the Italians, too, suburban residence means a greater probability of living in an ethnically diverse community.

**Ethnic exodus**

This picture gains further credibility when it is taken to the level of specific ethnic neighborhoods. To accomplish this, John Logan, Kyle Crowder, and I have identified the region's
ethnic neighborhoods in 1980 and 1990 census data as clusters of census tracts where any of the three groups has an above-average concentration (operationally defined as 35 percent or more of the population).

For the Germans and Irish, these neighborhoods are, generally speaking, few and small; only tiny fractions of each group could be considered to reside in them (just 4 percent of the Irish in 1990, for instance). For the Italians, however, there are a number of these neighborhoods, some of which are quite large and most of which take on familiar outlines, identifiable with well-known Italian areas (such as Brooklyn's Bensonhurst). Nevertheless, it is still the case that just a minority of the group—a quarter in both 1980 and 1990—resides in Italian neighborhoods.

The Italian neighborhoods, moreover, underwent substantial changes during the 1980s. The outflow of Italians from the region's large cities especially drained inner-city ethnic neighborhoods. Bensonhurst was the largest contiguous Italian area in 1980, home to nearly 150,000 persons of Italian ancestry. By 1990, it had shrunk in its Italian population to less than 100,000, while also diminishing in spatial extent. Most other inner-city Italian neighborhoods also lost population, though not on such a dramatic scale. In effect, this outflow removed Italians from their most ethnic neighborhoods.

The suburban areas with growing numbers of Italians are very different in character. In the first place, the great majority of suburban Italians reside outside of anything resembling an ethnic neighborhood. Moreover, population growth bypassed inner-suburban ethnic neighborhoods, such as the Italian areas of Yonkers, and insofar as growth was funneled into outer-suburban areas of Italian concentration, these are not very ethnic, as measured for example by the number of residents who are intermarried.

In sum, even in the New York region, the ethnic mosaic par excellence, trends favor the further residential assimilation of white ethnic groups. The Irish, long a prominent ethnic group in the region, are already residentially intermixed. The Italians, some of whose ethnic communities are still conspicuous, reside mostly in non-ethnic areas, and their continuing suburbanization is eroding the most ethnic Italian neighborhoods.
The intermarriage melting pot

Interruption is usually regarded, with justification, as the litmus test of assimilation. This remains true even if marriage can no longer be taken for granted as a lifetime commitment. A high rate of intermarriage signals that individuals of putatively different ethnic backgrounds no longer perceive social and cultural differences significant enough to create a barrier to a long-term union. In this sense, intermarriage could be said to test the salience, and even the existence, of a social boundary between ethnic categories. Moreover, intermarriage carries obvious and profound implications for the familial and, more broadly, the social contexts in which the next generation will be raised. Its significance in this respect is not much diminished by a high rate of divorce because the children of divorces usually carry on close relationships with both sides of their families.

Among whites, intermarriage has advanced to the point where a substantial majority of marriages involve some degree of ethnic intermixing. In 1990 census data, more than half (56 percent) of whites have spouses whose ethnic backgrounds do not overlap with their own at all (included in this count are spouses whose ethnic ancestries are described as just "American" or in some other non-ethnic way). Only one-fifth have spouses with identical ethnic backgrounds. The remainder, not quite one-quarter, have spouses whose ancestries overlap their own in some respect but differ in some other. Of necessity, one or both partners in these marriages have mixed ancestry (as when, for instance, a German-Irish groom takes an Irish-Italian bride).

Interruption has had an especially deep impact on the groups from southern and eastern Europe. This is partly because their smaller size (in comparison, say, with the German ancestry group) makes them more vulnerable to what is called "out-marriage." It may also be due to their concentration in regions of the nation where ethnic diversity is greater among whites (the Northeast compared to the South, for instance), increasing the likelihood that they will have close relationships with individuals of diverse backgrounds.

Interruption patterns are displayed in Table 3 for the seven largest ancestry categories of whites. It shows that, among
Table 3
Marriage patterns of major ancestry groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestry groups (in order of size)</th>
<th>Cohort born 1956-1965 Spouse’s ancestry</th>
<th>Cohort born 1916-1925 Spouse’s ancestry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% entirely</td>
<td>% partly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scots/Scots-Irish</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


those aged 25 to 34 in 1990, a majority of each category had married unambiguously outside of it, with out-marriage being more common among the smaller ethnic groups.

For the large, long-established categories (English, Germans, and Irish), marriages to individuals whose ancestry is partly from the group figure prominently in the pattern and help explain why the incidence of unambiguous out-marriage is not greater. Perhaps some of these marriages, where there is an ethnic ingredient in common, deserve to be viewed as in-group marriages. However, in the majority of cases, both spouses have ethnically mixed ancestry and share only one ethnic element in common. Thus, they should probably be viewed as akin to intermarriages, even if not so in the strictest sense.

Interrmarriage has attained, by any standard, very high levels among the Italians and Poles, the two groups in the table from southern and eastern Europe. Close to three-quarters of the younger Italians have spouses without Italian ancestry; for Poles, the equivalent figure is higher still. However, marriages involving spouses who both have some ancestry from these groups is higher than it would be if marriage were “random” with respect to ancestry, and there is some sign that the increase in intermarriage may be leveling off. A likely forecast is that intermarriage will continue at high levels but that a significant minority of each of these groups will continue to
look within for marriage partners.

The rising tide of intermarriage is sweeping over religious barriers as well. This is demonstrated most tellingly by the surge of intermarriage among Jews since the 1960s. Data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey reveal that 57 percent of Jews marrying since 1985 have married partners raised in other religions. Just two decades earlier, the figure had been only 11 percent. The consequences of Jewish-Gentile intermarriage are still debatable, at least in principle, because of the possibilities of the non-Jewish spouse converting or of the children being raised as Jewish. However, the data suggest that neither possibility characterizes a majority of intermarried couples. Besides, even if these possibilities were the rule, they do not diminish the import of the fact that religious origins are playing a lesser role in the choice of a spouse than they once did.

An obvious consequence of intermarriage is ethnically mixed ancestry, which holds potentially profound implications for ethnic groups. Though the mere fact of mixed ancestry is certainly no bar to ethnic feelings and loyalties, it is likely to reduce their intensity, especially because most individuals with mixed ancestry are raised with limited exposure to ethnic cultures in their most robust form.

**Marriage across racial lines**

What is unfolding among whites through intermarriage resembles, then, the proverbial melting pot, but with mainly European ingredients to this point. It is still the case that just a small proportion of marriages by whites (2 percent) are contracted with Hispanics or with nonwhites. The vast majority of their intermarriages, in other words, involve individuals of European ancestries only (the most notable exception being the nontrivial fraction of whites who claim some American-Indian ancestry, typically mixed with European).

Lower rates of racial intermarriage are partly a result of residential segregation, which particularly affects blacks and new immigrant groups, and partly a consequence of the reluctance of many whites, the largest pool of potential marriage partners, to accept a nonwhite or Hispanic spouse. No doubt, there is also a greater desire on the part of many minority-
group members to find husbands and wives from their own
groups. For the new immigrant groups, from the Caribbean,
Latin America, and Asia, the overall intermarriage rate is also
driven down by their concentration in the first and second
generations, where intermarriage tends to be lower in general.

The extreme case is that of African Americans ("non-His-
panic blacks" in census terminology). According to 1990 cen-
sus data, just 4 percent of African Americans have married
outside their group. However, this figure hides an important
and long-standing gender discrepancy: intermarriage is consid-
erably more prevalent among black men than among black
women (6 percent versus 2 percent). For both sexes, most
intermarriage takes place with non-Hispanic white partners.

Hispanics on the whole exhibit considerably higher, but
still modest, levels of intermarriage, even in the second gen-
eration. Seventy percent of U.S.-born Hispanics are married
to other Hispanics, mostly to individuals of the same national
origin. In the Hispanic case, there is no gender gap in inter-
marriage. Its frequency does, however, vary considerably by
specific group, and the total for Hispanics overall is influ-
enced especially by the high rate of endogamy on the part of
the largest Hispanic group, Mexican Americans.

Interrmarriage is only a bit more common among U.S.-born
Asians overall, two-thirds of whom marry other Asians. As
with Hispanics, this total disguises substantial variation by spe-
cific national origin and is heavily affected by a high level of
endogamy in one group, Japanese Americans, who form the

American Indians bracket the intermarriage spectrum at
the high end. More than half have married outside the Ameri-
can-Indian population; the great majority of their intermar-
riages are to non-Hispanic whites. However, since American
Indians represent less than 1 percent of the national popula-
tion, their intermarriage tendency does not have a great influ-
ence on the total pattern.

The predominantly European cast to the contemporary mel-
ting of ethnic lines through intermarriage may be changing, at
least to some degree. One indication is the higher-than-aver-
age frequency of marriage to Hispanics or nonwhites on the
part of younger non-Hispanic whites. Among those in the 25
to 34 age group, close to 4 percent have married minority
group members; though still low in absolute terms, this figure
represents a measurable increase over past levels.

Rising intermarriage with racial minorities is having its most
dramatic effects among African Americans, as the demogra-
pher Matthijs Kalmijn first documented (in the September
1993 issue of the journal Social Forces) with an analysis of
marriages for the two-decade period following the Supreme
Court's 1967 invalidation of the last anti-miscegenation law.
In 1990 census data, 10 percent of 25- to 34-year-old black
men have intermarried, most with white women. This figure,
while obviously not high, nevertheless represents a stunning
upward shift from the historical level. The change has not
been as striking for black women, but the level of intermar-
riage has risen among younger black women to nearly 4 per-
cent.

Interruption involving members of groups from new im-
migration is virtually certain to increase in the near future, as
the ranks of their second- and third-generation adults swell.
Yet, whether marriage across social boundaries defined by non-
European ancestries will attain the acceptability—indeed the
unremarkableness—that intermarriage appears to have attained
in the case of European ancestries remains to be seen.

Assimilation's continuing relevance

The assimilation trends tracked by the census can, to be
sure, appear somewhat crude, lacking the nuanced chiaroscuro
of personal experience where ethnicity may still be present.
Nevertheless, taken together, these trends convincingly show
that the social bases for ethnic distinctiveness are eroding
among Americans of European ancestry. Indeed, the erosion
would continue even if the trends were to come to a halt. As
older, currently more ethnic generations are replaced by their
children and grandchildren, who are less ethnic on average,
the groups as a whole become less ethnic.

Decline, however, does not mean disappearance, certainly
not in the foreseeable future. The overall picture is mixed,
with the proportions of the different elements—i.e., “assimi-
lated” versus “ethnic,” to portray them in their extremes—
shifting in the assimilated direction.
A larger question, and an unanswerable one for the moment, concerns the relevance of the European-American experience of assimilation for non-European minorities. Even if one narrows the question by accepting that assimilation is probably most relevant for immigrant groups, as opposed to those whose entry to American society was coerced by enslavement or conquest, the conditions of contemporary immigration are sufficiently different from those prevalent in the past that generalizations based on earlier experience are open to doubt.

Currently, we lack good theories and hard-and-fast empirical knowledge about the genesis of European-American assimilation. To what extent does it reflect persisting forces in American society—the lure of opportunities in the mainstream economy, for instance, or the permeability of ethnic boundaries in a society populated largely by immigration? To what extent is it the product of historically unique events and conditions, such as the period of economic expansion following World War II or the virtual shutdown of immigration after 1930, which prevented the renewal of ethnic communities through continuing immigration? To what extent is it restricted to those with European ancestry and white skin? Without answers to these questions, we will have to wait to observe the trajectories of new immigrant groups to assess the ultimate relevance of assimilation for them. Yet, one has to suspect that assimilation is far from a spent force.