

Ethnic Pluralism in the 1970s*

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In 1965, in an introduction written for a series of essays entitled "The Negro American" in the scholarly journal *Daedalus*, President Lyndon Johnson wrote: "Nothing is of greater significance to the welfare and vitality of this nation than the movement to secure equal rights for Negro Americans" (*Daedalus*, 1981: v). Johnson spoke these words at the zenith of personal and national attention to the state of black America. Three years later the commission that he had appointed to investigate the causes of the civil disorders that swept American cities during the late 1960s — disorders that claimed a toll of over 100 lives and millions of dollars in property damage — attributed the primary responsibility for the outbreaks to "white racism" and concluded that "there can be no higher claim on the Nation's conscience" than to eliminate "deepening racial division" by a "compassionate, ... massive, and sustained" commitment of resources and energy" (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968).

Yet Johnson, by that time preoccupied with the escalation of the war in Vietnam, ignored the commission's recommendations, just as his successor, Richard Nixon, disputed its basic conclusions. Thus, during the 1970s, despite several significant private and governmental efforts to implement programs to achieve racial equality, the state of black America no longer occupied the prominence in the American consciousness that it did in 1965. The policy of "benign neglect" that Daniel P. Moynihan urged Richard Nixon to adopt towards blacks appears to have been realized. As the editors of a 1981 issue of *Daedalus* devoted to American racial minorities wrote, "It is a measure of the distance we have traveled in sixteen years that it is almost unthinkable to imagine any white politician today making such a statement as Johnson's in 1965, giving such primacy to the issue of racial equality" (*Daedalus*, 1981: vi).

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If there has been a decline in attention devoted to the state of black America since the late 60s, there has also been a corresponding surge of interest in ethnicity and a reassertion of the importance of ethnic pluralism. The heightened cultural and political self-awareness that characterized the black protest movement of the 1960s extended in the 1970s to Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, and, especially, to "white ethnics" — those descendants, primarily Catholic, of southern and eastern Europeans who had migrated to the United States in massive numbers between 1890 and 1915. As the nation's preoccupation with black America waned, interest in ethnicity became increasingly fashionable.

In this essay I would like to examine the dominant developments and trends of the past decade that relate to race and ethnicity. I will first consider the nature and implications of the changing demography of American racial and ethnic groups. I will then turn my attention to the "ethnic revival" of the 1970s and its relation to the changing status of European ethnic groups and, finally, to an assessment of continuities and changes in the status of black Americans.

Demographic Changes in the 1970s

In order adequately to comprehend the dynamics of ethnic relations during the 1970s and to anticipate the nature of ethnic relations in the future, it may be useful to examine briefly some of the demographic changes that occurred during the 1970s. Table 1 provides the basic data for several broad racial and ethnic categories that were obtained in the 1980 federal census. Primarily because of increased Asian and Latin immigration and relatively lower birth rates among whites, the white percentage of the population is less today than at any time since the Civil War; blacks, Asians, American Indians, and Hispanics now comprise more than one-fifth (20.3 percent) of the American people.

The nation's largest racial minority — blacks — increased by approximately four million to a total of 26 and a half million, or more than the entire population of Canada or of the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland combined. As in 1970, blacks continued to be found overwhelmingly in the nation's urban areas — especially in the nation's largest cities. Today New York City has a black population of more than one and three-quarters million, more than any other city in the world and than any state in the country. Chicago has more blacks than Mississippi or South Carolina, Philadelphia more than Arkansas and Kentucky combined (Pettigrew, 1979). For the first time in this century, there was little change in the

percentage of blacks — slightly more than half (53%) of the total black population — who lived in the South. Although some blacks were still migrating from the South to the North and West, their numbers were nearly balanced by blacks who were moving to this region.

During the 1970s Hispanics (a general rubric that includes several extremely disparate national and ethnic categories — Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Colombians, Argentines, etc.) increased by more than five million, or more than 61 percent, an increase that was greater both proportionately and numerically than the black population, which grew by 17 percent. Although earlier predictions that by 1990 Hispanics will exceed the number of blacks in the country seem exaggerated, the increase in the Hispanic population was substantial. California had the greatest number of Hispanics — more than four and a half million, or about 31 percent of the 14.6 million enumerated in 1980. Texas and New York state together accounted for a comparable number, thus enabling these three states alone to account for more than three-fifths of all Hispanics in the country. Reflecting its historic role as the nation's — indeed, the world's — most ethnically diverse city, New York City remained the American city with the largest Hispanic population. Today blacks and Hispanics together comprise more than 42 percent of New York's population.

Among the most striking demographic changes of the last decade, however, was the growth of the Asian population, which nearly doubled between 1970 and 1980. During the 1970s the number of Koreans increased by 412%, the number of Filipinos by 125%, and the number of Chinese by 85%. The number of Chinese and Filipinos both surpassed the Japanese, who in 1970 had the largest Asian ethnic group. Moreover, more than one-third million Asian Indians and more than one-quarter million Vietnamese, neither of whom had previously been separately enumerated, helped to swell the number of Asians to more than three and a half million. Regionally, Asians were concentrated in the West, especially in California, which had more Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and Vietnamese than any other state.

The rapidly growing numbers of Hispanics and Asians reflected changes in American Immigration law embodied in the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which went into effect in 1968. This law dramatically changed the underlying rationale of America's immigration policy. The previous law, which was enacted in 1924, had established immigration quotas for each country based on the assumption that some people (e.g., the British, who were allocated more than 65,000 of the 150,000 annual quotas) were more assimilable and hence more

desirable than others (such as the Italians, who were granted a quota of less than 6,000, or the Greeks, whose quota was 310). Reflecting the racist assumptions upon which it was based, most Asians had been excluded completely.

Enacted at the height of the "equality revolution" of the 1960s, the 1965 law eliminated the old quota system, increased the annual number of quotas to 170,000, placed a maximum limit of 20,000 per country, and for the first time established a limit (of 120,000) on immigration from the western hemisphere. It also established a series of preferences for those who would be reunited with their families, for those with occupational skills needed in the United States, and for political refugees.

Throughout the 1970s the number of permanent immigrants increased substantially, so that by 1980 more than 880,000 immigrants were legally admitted, a number greater than in any year since 1914. Given the declining birth rate of the American population, immigrants now account for a much more substantial percentage of the nation's total population growth than they have since the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Even more dramatic than the increase in numbers, however, were the changes in the sources from which immigrants were being drawn. Before enactment of the 1965 law, immigrants into the United States had historically been overwhelmingly Europeans. Today the predominant sources of immigration are Asia, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. European immigration declined from nearly three-fifths of the total (59 percent) during the 1950s to one-eighth (12 percent) in 1978. Similarly, Asian immigration increased from 6 percent to 42 percent and immigrants from the western hemisphere (not including Canadians) rose from 23 percent to 41 percent. In 1978 the leading countries from which the United States received immigrants were Mexico, the West Indies, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cuba, Korea, Dominican Republic, China, and India. Reflecting these changes, Polenberg has recently pointed out that by 1976 the United States "was receiving fewer immigrants from Italy and Greece combined than from India alone, fewer from Germany than from Thailand, fewer from Ireland than from Egypt, and fewer from Poland than from Trinidad and Tobago" (Polenberg, 1980: 282).

The preference for those with skills needed by the United States has meant that immigrants entering today are much more highly educated than in the past. Physicians, nurses, scientists, architects, artists, entertainers, engineers, and others with highly technical skills have con-

tributed to a "brain drain," first from Europe and later from Third World nations that can least afford to lose their skills. (For example, more than half the physicians in New York City's municipal hospitals today are graduates of foreign medical schools). The preference for skills has meant that, unlike the situation during the peak years of American immigration between 1840 and 1920, it has become almost impossible for unskilled laborers to gain entrance unless they can claim a close family relationship or refugee status. It has also meant that, increasingly, the less highly skilled have resorted to illegal means to enter the country.

The category of refugees has proved to be a perennial problem. Given the existence of over 13 million political and economic refugees in the world today, the moral and political pressures to admit refugees are considerable. However, the refugee quotas established under the 1965 law and its subsequent revisions have proved inadequate to respond to these pressures. In some instances, as in the case of the Vietnamese, special laws were passed to enable the President to respond to emergency situations. In others, such as the case of the Cuban "freedom flotilla" in 1980, the political power of the American Cuban community and the propaganda value of thousands fleeing Castro's regime permitted a *de facto* circumvention of the law. However, as indicated by the cases of the Haitians or the Salvadorans, whose plight has been less widely publicized, the definition of "refugee" is essentially a political judgment. Although refugees from many oppressive political regimes have sought asylum in the United States, official government policy has given special treatment primarily to those fleeing Communism (e.g., the Cubans and the Vietnamese). There has been no comparable groundswell of support for those fleeing the rightist junta in El Salvador nor for admitting the basically unskilled Haitians seeking to escape poverty and the reactionary regime of "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

Finally, some brief comments about the extraordinarily complex issue of illegal immigrants are in order. The number of "undocumented aliens," who are primarily from Mexico and the Caribbean, ranges from 3 to 12 million. One of the most frequently cited sources of illegal immigration is the population explosion in Third World nations. However, population growth alone cannot account for the growing pressures for immigration. Paradoxically, Third World economic *development*, not underdevelopment, has contributed significantly. Economic development, with an emphasis on consumerism and consumption greatly influenced by an American model and American economic forces, has transformed the social structures of many devel-

oping societies. Simultaneously, unemployment, underemployment, and income inequalities preclude access by the majority of the population of these countries to these consumer goods. As Alejandro Portes, one of the leading American experts on recent Latin immigration into the United States, has written in regard to Mexico, "In the eyes of the Mexican worker, the United States stands as the place where the benefits of an advanced economy, promised but not delivered by the present [Mexican] national development strategy, can be turned into reality" (Portes, 1982:517-18). Ironically, the very economic forces generated by the American economic system, which has penetrated extensively into the economic life of Third World societies, have been instrumental in attracting the massive influx of immigrants to the United States. Thus, given the thrust of the modernization process and the impact of American political and economic power throughout the world, it appears inevitable that the United States will continue to attract immigrants — legal and illegal — from Third World sources, thereby reinforcing and recreating the historic ethnic diversity that, almost from its very founding, has characterized American society.

The Ethnic Revival

The reality of this "new immigrant wave" became a phenomenon of growing significance at precisely the time that, as mentioned previously, ethnicity and the celebration of America's ethnic diversity became more fashionable than ever before in its existence.

The notion of an ethnic revival, a resurgence of ethnicity, was especially reflected by increased academic attention to ethnicity during the 1970s, which was symbolized by the founding of several journals devoted to its analysis: *Ethnicity* (1974), *Journal of Ethnic Studies* (1974), *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (1978), *MELUS* (Multiethnic Literature in the United States) (1975), and, most recently, the *Journal of American Ethnic History* (1981). Finally, one of the most salient indices of the decade's rediscovery of ethnicity was publication in 1980 of the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, the most comprehensive resource available on the subject today.

The central issue in the debate over ethnicity concerned the nature of the assimilation process and the extent to which various ethnic groups have been — and should permit themselves to be — integrated, incorporated, or assimilated into the mainstream of American society. In his now classic analysis, *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), Milton Gordon distinguished among three ideologies or conceptual models — Anglo-Conformity, the melting pot, the cultural pluralism — that

have been used to explain the dynamics of intergroup relations in American life.

Anglo-conformity assumes that an ethnic minority should give up its distinctive cultural characteristics and adopt those of the dominant group. It can be expressed by the formula $A + B + C = A$, in which A is the dominant group and B and C represent ethnic minority groups that must conform to the values and life styles of the dominant group if they wish to achieve positions of power and prestige in the society. A policy of Anglo-conformity seeks a homogeneous society organized around the idealized cultural standards, institutions, and language of the dominant group.

Like Anglo-conformity, the ultimate objective of a "*melting pot*" policy is a society without ethnic differences. More tolerant than a policy of Anglo-conformity, the melting pot ideal sees ethnic differences as being lost in the creation of a new society and a new people — a synthesis unique and distinct from any of the different groups that formed it. Unlike Anglo-conformity, none of the contributing groups is considered to be superior; each is considered to have contributed the best of its cultural heritage to the creation of a new amalgam (e.g., Crevecoeur's new man). The melting pot ideal can be expressed by the formula $A + B + C = D$, in which A B and C represent the different contributing groups and D is the product of their synthesis.

Cultural pluralism refers to a system in which different cultures can coexist and be preserved. According to this notion, the strength and vitality of American society are derived from the many different ethnic groups that have made it a "nation of nations." Each group should be permitted to retain its unique qualities while affirming its allegiance to the larger society. It can be expressed by the equation $A + B + C = A + B + C$, in which A, B, and C are each ethnic groups that maintain their distinctiveness over time (Newrnan, 1973).

The main theme of the ethnic revival was the rediscovery and reassertion of the importance and value of cultural pluralism and a rejection of Anglo-conformity and melting pot conceptions, both of which envision an ideal society that ultimately is culturally homogeneous rather than culturally diverse. Although blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and Asians each asserted their unique cultural distinctiveness and rejected what they perceived as efforts to impose the culture of white middle class America on them, the primary impetus for the ethnic revival of the 1970s was from the so-called "white ethnics."

Spokespersons for the ethnic revival maintained that the movement

represented a spontaneous and broadly based reassertion of ethnic pride that was not restricted to intellectuals but reflected primarily the frequently ignored, unarticulated, but pervasive sentiments of working class ethnics as well. Michael Novak, the grandson of Slovakian immigrants and author of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971), was one of the foremost proponents of the "new ethnicity." He identified two basic elements in the new ethnicity: a sensitivity to and appreciation of the importance of ethnic pluralism and a self-conscious examination of one's own cultural heritage (Novak, 1971:17). Another prominent spokesman, Andrew Greeley, the prolific Irish-American sociologist, priest, and novelist, noted several ways in which this ethnic "consciousness raising" occurred: increased interest in the literary, intellectual, and artistic culture of one's ethnic background; visits to one's ancestral homeland; and increased use of one's ancestral language (Greeley, 1975: 149-51).

What are the reasons for this resurgence of ethnicity during the 70s? Foremost was the impact that the black protest movement had on the self-definition of other ethnic groups, in particular "white ethnics." On the one hand, the emphasis on black pride and on understanding black culture stimulated by the civil rights movement of the late 50s and 60s led many white ethnics to consider their own heritages more closely.

On the other hand, spokespersons for "white ethnics" criticized what they perceived to be the myopia of the white liberal, basically Protestant, Establishment. They contended that liberal academics and journalists, especially, were oblivious to the discrimination to which white ethnics historically had been subjected and tended to portray *them* as the primary source of racism toward blacks. For many white ethnics who felt that they had been the object of derision by liberals, such charges merely reinforced their perception that the conditions of their lives had not been given the same sympathetic treatment that was being given to blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans. Novak contends that from the white liberal perspective, these latter are "legitimate" minorities, but that the designation of "white ethnics" as minorities was unacceptable. The white ethnic's perspective, Novak wrote, was that "he is being asked to pay the entire price of the injustices done to blacks — he who is living on the margin himself — while those who are enriched pay nothing" (Novak, 1975: 112). Thus the ethnic revival was in some respects a defensive response to external pressures, particularly in its opposition to an increasingly

strident black protest movement, rather than a positive, liberating affirmation of self-identity.

In another sense, however, the movement had little to do with factors external to the "white ethnic" groups but was derived from the very success of these groups' adaptation to American society. By the 1970s the fourth generation of the southern and eastern European immigrants were entering adulthood. As the distance from their ancestral roots increased, their identification with these roots weakened. The decline of the ancestral language, the dispersion of ethnic neighborhoods, declining participation in and identification with the traditional religious community, and increased rates of ethnic intermarriage contributed to the decline of a meaningful ethnic identity.

Another of the major factors was what Greeley has termed the "ethnic miracle" (1982). Using extensive national social surveys, Greeley contends that "the ethnics have made it." The income levels of Irish, German, Italian, and Polish Catholics are today exceeded only by Jews, not by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Although the overall educational levels of Polish, Italian, and Slavic Catholics lag behind the national white average, when parental educational levels are held constant, Catholic ethnics have higher educational achievements than any other ethnic group except Jews. Indeed, Irish Catholics, once the most despised and unfavorably stereotyped of all European ethnic groups, are today "the richest, best educated, and most prestigious occupationally of any gentile religio-ethnic group." Thus, Greeley concludes, "in a very short space of time, the length of one generation, more or less, the American dream has come true" for European Catholic ethnic groups. The increased economic, educational, and occupational mobility that Greeley has documented indicates that "white ethnics" have moved into the mainstream of American society, where their identification with their ethnic origins has become increasingly remote (Greeley, 1982).

Moreover, there is considerable evidence that ethnicity as a source of social cohesion is decreasing, especially among the third and fourth generations. In "Symbolic Ethnicity" (1982), Herbert Gans disputes the notion of an enduring ethnic revival, arguing that cultural and social assimilation continue to take place in American society. Ethnicity is no longer rooted in group membership or cultural patterns but instead has become "symbolic," a matter of choice, an ethnicity of "last resort." In his study of an Italian-American community in Boston in the 1960s, Gans did not find ethnicity to be increasing. Instead, he

found a "straight line" decline in ethnicity over three generations. That is, ethnicity was less significant in each succeeding generation (Gans, 1962). More recently, a study by Sandberg showed a constant decline in ethnic consciousness, identification, and cohesion among Polish-Americans in Los Angeles; by the fourth generation, ethnicity had ceased to play an important role in their lives (Sandberg, 1974).

Recent analyses suggest that white ethnics have also experienced considerable social and marital assimilation, especially as individual members of specific ethnic groups have achieved middle-class status. In national studies of social assimilation among American Catholics, Alba (1981, 1982) has found that marriage outside one's ethnic group has been extensive. He also found that rates of inter-marriage were most pronounced among the third generation and among the youngest members of each ethnic groups. Similarly, in his study of ethnic consciousness in Providence, Rhode Island, among Irish and Italians, Goering found that only 15 percent of the first generation had married outside their own ethnic group, whereas 63 percent of the third generation had done so (Goering, 1971:382n).

Further evidence of the trend toward greater social and marital assimilation can be found in the rates of intermarriage for American Jews and for Japanese-Americans. The rate of Jewish intermarriage increased from approximately 3 percent of Jews marrying non-Jews between 1900 and 1940 to nearly one-third (32 percent) between 1966 and 1972 (Massarick, n.d.:10). Even more dramatic is the increasing rate of marital assimilation among Japanese-Americans. Tinker (1973) found that more than half the marriages of Japanese were to non-Japanese. Moreover, Levine and Montero (1973) have documented very substantial socioeconomic mobility among Japanese-Americans, mobility that has also increasingly isolated them from an identifiable Japanese-American ethnic community.

Yet, paradoxically, at precisely the moment that the white ethnics have become most fully culturally and socially assimilated into American society, their interest in and identification with their ethnic roots has become most pronounced. In *The Ethnic Myth* Stephen Steinberg has recently argued that "... the impulse to recapture the ethnic past is a belated realization that ethnicity is rapidly diminishing as a significant factor in American life" (Steinberg, 1981:73). Although neither is especially sympathetic to the notion of an ethnic revival, both Irving Howe (1977) and Herbert Gans (1982) suggest another source of the surge of interest in things ethnic. In an interpretation reminiscent of Herberg's (1955) explanation of the surge of religiosity a generation

earlier, they find that ethnicity provides a fashionable, socially acceptable source of personal identity in an increasingly homogenized America. In Howe's words, ,

We are all aware that our ties with the European past grow increasingly feeble. Yet we feel uneasy before the prospect of becoming "just Americans." We feel uneasy before the prospect of becoming as undistinguishable from one another as our motel rooms are, or as flavorless and mass-produced as the bread many of us eat. (Howe, 1977:18)

Thus, although there appears to be widespread interest today among many Americans in retrieving or maintaining a sense of ethnic identity — what Gans called "symbolic ethnicity," precisely how deep and enduring the ethnic revival will remain is problematic.

The State of Black America

If Greeley's characterization of the "ethnic miracle" is correct, if Poles, Italians, and the Irish have "made it," what are the implications of this fact? For many Americans, the "extraordinary success story" of Catholics and Jews, who had to overcome poverty, discrimination, illiteracy, and chronic overcrowding in the nation's urban ghettos, is proof that America is indeed the land of opportunity. One frequently invoked explanation for the success of "white ethnics" is that they were able to overcome the disabilities with which they were confronted because, through hard work, industry, perseverance, self-reliance, and thrift, they exploited as fully as possible the economic opportunity that America afforded — they pulled themselves up "by their own bootstraps," without governmental assistance. Another explanation contends that ethnic economic success is "only a matter of time" and that the most recent ethnic groups must not be impatient with their present place at the bottom of the economic ladder, for in several generations they will inevitably repeat the experience of European ethnic groups and climb into the American economic, educational, and political mainstream. Such explanations are obviously directed at those ethnic groups that have not yet achieved levels of economic success comparable to those of the "white ethnics" — Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and, in particular, black Americans. In the remaining portion of this essay I would like to examine the experience of black Americans during the 1970s.

For black Americans the 1960s was a decade of progress; during this period blacks experienced their greatest gains since emancipation. These gains were brought about by unprecedented efforts by federal,

state, and local governments and by private organizations to remove the inequalities and to redress the injustices that had for years relegated black Americans to second class citizenship.

Most visible and dramatic were the legal changes that emanated from the federal government. For the first time in American history the three branches of the federal government acted in concert on behalf of black Americans. The Supreme Court, whose 1954 *Brown* decision outlawing segregated schools symbolized the beginning of a new era for blacks, extended substantially the implications of the *Brown* decision. It outlawed state laws prohibiting racial intermarriage and prohibited racial discrimination in the rental and sale of private and public property. Moreover, it acted decisively to reject efforts by local school districts to evade its desegregation rulings, including unanimous support for school busing as one means of achieving that goal. Lyndon Johnson, a Southerner, provided the most unequivocal moral and political support of black aspirations of any President in American history. Through his leadership, the Congress enacted legislation that outlawed discrimination in public accommodations, employment, housing, voting, and education. Furthermore, his "Great Society" economic programs provided federal financial support to enhance occupational and educational opportunities for blacks.

By the end of the 1960s black Americans, particularly the better educated and more highly skilled, had made substantial gains, especially economically and educationally. One of the best indices of these changes was black median family income, which in 1959 was only half of white median family income. By 1964 it had risen to 54 percent of white income and, by 1969, reflecting the national efforts to reduce black inequalities and the economic expansion and prosperity that characterized the decade, it had risen to 61 percent. Thus, although the problems of black America, particularly for the poorly educated and the unskilled, remained acute, the efforts of the 1960s had clearly produced some impressive advances.

Compared with the progress that had been achieved during the 1960s, the decade of the 70s was at best a period during which the rate of black advance slowed appreciably; at worst it was a time of "retrogression" and "retrenchment." The civil rights movement, which during the 1960s had, despite internal differences, generally displayed consensus concerning both goals and tactics, was now in disarray. Part of the reason for this lay in the movement's very success in achieving the impressive legislative and judicial victories of the 60s. But it also reflected the fact that for many black Americans the optimism of the

early 60s had been shattered by the failure of these legislative changes to institute meaningful changes in their lives. Increasingly it became apparent that the abolition of legal barriers to public accommodations or to suburban housing, for example, did not address the essential economic problems of a substantial portion of the black population. The erosion of the fragile consensus among blacks was symbolized by the outbreaks of the civil disorders of the late 60s and by the emergence of the slogan, "black power," both of which did little to allay conscious and unconscious white anxieties concerning black demands for substantial changes in the status quo. As many whites grew increasingly weary of what they perceived as government support for lawlessness and the constant media attention to blacks, the conservative mood of the country, symbolized by the 1968 election of Richard Nixon to the Presidency, increased.

The most dramatic advances for blacks during the 1970s were found in the political arena. The tactics of public confrontations, boycotts, and demonstrations that in the late 50s and early 60s had been successful in effecting social change were supplanted in the 1970s by more traditional political activity. "Politics is the civil-rights movement of the 1970s," said Maynard Jackson, the black mayor of Atlanta, Georgia (Sitkoff, 1981:229). Such a stance was possible because of the increase in black political strength brought about by^rthe impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which provided federal protection for the efforts of blacks to register and to vote in states throughout the South. The percentage of Southern blacks registered to vote increased from 35 percent in 1964 to 65 percent in 1969. In Alabama the increase was from 19 to 61 percent, in Mississippi from 7 to 67 percent, and in Georgia from 27 to 60 percent (Polenberg, 1980:192).

These increases in black voters throughout the South contributed substantially to increased black political representation. In 1964 there were only 103 blacks holding elected offices (ranging from local school board member to president) among the nearly half a million elected officials in the entire country. By 1970 this number had increased to 1,400 and by 1980 to 4,700, two thirds of them in the South. Moreover, the number of black mayors had increased from none in 1965 to 120 in 1980, including the major cities of Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Richmond, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

Moreover, because of their strategic location in the major metropolitan areas of key industrial states, the combined voting strength of blacks represents a possible balance of power in close elections. This was demonstrated first in 1960, when John Kennedy's narrow victory

over Richard Nixon was made possible by the substantial victory margin he obtained from black voters in several key industrial states. However, it was even more noteworthy in the 1976 election, when over 6.5 million blacks voted, over 90 percent for Jimmy Carter. Carter owed his victory margin in most Southern, as well as in several Northern, states, and thus his election, directly to the overwhelming support of black voters.

Yet despite these highly visible changes, by 1982 blacks still remained less than 1 percent of all elected officials in the country — a percentage not even closely approximating their 12 percent of the total population. In the South, where blacks comprise more than 20 percent of the population, only 3 percent of the elected officials are black. Moreover, in many instances the political power that black elected officials do have is limited by the fact that they are politically isolated or that, given the exodus of white middle class residents and businesses to the suburbs, they have gained political power without the financial resources with which to provide the jobs and services (educational, medical, police and fire protection) that their constituents most urgently need.

During the 70s, blacks also experienced substantial gains in education. By 1975 almost identical percentages of blacks (87%) and whites (86%) aged 5-20 were enrolled in school; among persons 25-34 the median number of school years completed by blacks was only slightly less than for whites (12.00 for blacks and 12.60 for whites). During the 1970s there was a significant narrowing of the racial gap in levels of educational achievement. In 1960 33 percent of blacks aged 20-24 had completed high school, compared with 61 percent of whites. By 1978 73 percent of blacks and 85 percent of whites had done so. In 1960 only 4 percent of blacks and 12 percent of whites 24-34 had completed four or more years of college. By 1978 comparable figures were 11 percent for blacks and 25 percent for whites. Similarly, although the black high school dropout rate was greater than for whites, there was a substantial reduction in the percentage of blacks who dropped out of high school (from 22% in 1968 to less than 17% in 1978 compared to a decline of 11.9% to 11.3% for whites. Furthermore, a steadily increasing percentage of blacks are attending college, so that by 1977 the percentage enrolled was nearly proportional to the black percentage of the total population, a striking increase over the college attendance rates of blacks in the mid-60s (Jones, 1981).

However, these statistics obscure substantial qualitative differences in black educational achievement. Ironically, black students in the

South today are far more likely to attend racially integrated elementary and secondary schools than black students in the North. Because of the patterns of residential segregation in most American cities, 70 percent of black children outside the South attend schools that are comprised predominantly of minority children. The situation is most acute in the nation's 26 largest cities, where three-fourths of all black children attend schools that have greater than 90 percent minority enrollment. It is this pattern of increasing racial isolation that has led to the increasing use of busing of school children to achieve racially balanced schools.

The narrowing of the gap in terms of college attendance obscures the fact that, although black students are today found in a much wider range of educational institutions (including the nation's most selective colleges and universities) than ever before, a disproportionately larger percentage of blacks than whites attend two-year junior and community colleges and about one-third attend historically black colleges. Although blacks now comprise nearly 11 percent of students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities in the United States, they received less than 7 percent of the bachelors degrees awarded in 1976-76. The disparity becomes even more marked at the graduate and professional levels. In 19%-76 blacks represented less than 6 percent of the graduate school enrollments, 4.5 percent of professional school enrollment, and during that year received less than 4 percent of the doctorates awarded (Jones, 1981). Although there clearly have been significant educational advances for blacks during the past decade, whether these educational improvements can be translated into improved economic status remains problematic.

Thus, although considerable disparities between black and white still exist in politics and education, the trends in these arenas indicate qualified improvements for black Americans. However, such progress did not take place in the economic sphere, perhaps the most important institutional category. During the 1970s the economic inequalities between black and white increased substantially. The income gap separating black and white widened. As I previously noted, during the 1960s black median family income rose from 50 percent of white family income in 1959 to 61 percent in 1969. By 1979 it had declined to 57 percent. The gap in terms of absolute dollars nearly doubled, from a difference of \$3,800 in 1969 to \$7,500 in 1979. With the exception of three years during the 1970s, since 1954 the official black unemployment rate has annually been at least double that for whites. In 1980 it stood at more than 13 percent of the black labor force. The National

Urban League, whose research division continually surveys black households, contends that the official unemployment rate substantially underrepresents real unemployment because it does not include discouraged workers who have dropped out of the labor force entirely. Thus the Urban League's Hidden Unemployment Index, which includes such individuals, placed the 1980 unemployment figure at 25 percent — a figure equal to the national rate at the height of the Great Depression (Hill, 1981).

Finally, the official unemployment rate for black teenagers stood at nearly 40 percent throughout most of the decade, again more than double the rate for whites. But these figures are national averages and obscure the variations among different cities, in some of which, the Urban League estimates, the jobless rate for black teenagers may be as high as 80 percent. Thus the overall economic status of black America appears to have deteriorated during the 70s.

But a consideration of the overall socioeconomic status of blacks obscures the growing class divisions within black America. The role and significance of these class divisions has generated the most controversial debate in American race relations today. In this book *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978) black sociologist William J. Wilson argues that in the economic life of black Americans today "class has become more important than race in determining black access to privilege and power." Wilson contends that in the past systematic racial discrimination was the major factor responsible for the unequal economic, political, and social status of black Americans. However, in modern American society many of the traditional racial barriers have been fundamentally altered. There have been changes in the economy and in governmental and corporate commitment to racial equality. These changes have enabled the black middle class, which possesses the requisite training and educational qualifications, to experience "unprecedented job opportunities in the growing government and corporate sectors, opportunities that are at least comparable to those of whites with equivalent qualifications" (Wilson, 1981:37).

During the 1970s middle class blacks made impressive economic advances. The number of blacks in professional and managerial positions increased to two and a half times what it had been in 1965. Indeed, between 1975 and 1980 the largest gains in black employment were in higher-status occupations. During this period the number of blacks employed increased by 1.3 million, over half of them in managerial, professional and craft jobs (Hill, 1981:22). Moreover, Wilson points out that, in contrast to the situation prior to 1960 in which the

ratio of black income to white income actually decreased as educational attainment increased, this pattern has now been reversed; the higher the black educational level, the more closely incomes approximate those of whites. In 1978 black males who graduated from college earned on average slightly more than comparable whites (Wilson, 1981:37).

However, Wilson argues, there is a growing division in black America between the middle class and a poverty-stricken underclass, which lacks education and job skills, is characterized by high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency, and is isolated residentially from employment opportunities. While the underclass has failed to participate in the progress experienced by the black middle class, its social and economic position has deteriorated. Although the black underclass represents a legacy of racial discrimination, class, not racial, factors are primarily responsible for sustaining the underclass today. Lacking the necessary training and job skills for positions in the modern economy, members of the underclass are instead the victims of broad economic and technological changes in American society. Even if all racial prejudice and discrimination were eliminated, the black underclass would still lack the necessary qualifications with which to participate in the mainstream of the American economy and would continue to be found primarily in the lowpaying, unskilled sector of the economy where unemployment is extremely high.

The thrust of Wilson's thesis is that major attention must be directed not merely to the removal of racial barriers (which he acknowledges still confront blacks in education, politics, and, especially, in housing) but to the very structure of the American economy and its inability to provide economic opportunity for a substantial segment of its population. However, the implications of his analysis transcend the specific situation of blacks and extend to other racial-ethnic minorities (Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans especially) who increasingly have been isolated in terms of education and job skills and locked into the poverty areas of cities where employment opportunities have substantially diminished during the past two decades. The challenge for American society in the next decade, therefore, will be not only to ensure that the barriers of racial discrimination continue to recede, but that the class barriers that preclude minority access to economic opportunities are also eliminated.

Table 1
Racial and Hispanic Population in the United States
1970 - 1980

	Number (in thousands)		Percentage distribution	
	1980	1970	1980	1970
TOTAL	226,505	203,212	100.0	100.0
White	188,341	177,749	83.2	87.5
Black	26,488	22,580	11.7	11.1
American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut	1,418	827	0.6	0.4
Asian and Pacific Islander	3,501	1,539	1.5	0.8
Chinese	806	435	0.4	0.2
Filipino	775	343	0.3	0.2
Japanese	701	591	0.3	0.3
Asian Indian	362	NA	0.2	—
Korean	355	NA	0.1	—
Vietnamese	262	NA	0.1	—
Hispanic*	14,606	9,073	6.4	4.5
Mexican-American*	8,763	4,532	3.9	2.2
Puerto Rican*	2,044	1,429	0.9	0.7
Cuban*	876	544	0.4	0.3
Central-South American*	1,168	1,508	0.5	0.7
Other*	1,753	1,057	0.8	0.5
Other	6,757	517	3.0	0.3

NA — Not available

* — 1980 data estimated

* — Hispanics included in white, black and "other" categories

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