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### Becoming American

How does an individual find their place in foreign territory, with different customs, and often a different language? These are only a few obstacles new populations must overcome to be associated with the dominant group. Historically the United States has, for the most part, welcomed immigrants and embraced the concept of a melting pot society where different people from different parts of the world share their cultures and enrich the diversity of America.

Lucian W. Pye's book *Politics, Personality, and Nation Building* 1962, addresses the dilemma of assimilation that immigrant groups encounter upon entering a new nation:

The power of others is...absolute for it is the power of making one willing to change oneself into their image. There is possibly no other circumstance in which people can sense more fully the human meanings of power and attraction than at the heart of the acculturation process, for this is the point at which people are giving up the most precious thing they have, their own integrity, in order to take a part of the identity of others who are foreign, with all that that word can mean.

Pye paints a less romantic picture than the melting-pot comparison by pointing out that the covert expectation of the host community is for the ethnic group to shed their foreign practices and develop a completely new, in this case American, identity. Pye asserts that there is no melting or blending of cultures to make a stronger America. If immigrants want to find a place in America the requirements are clear and relatively simple to explain, forget your past. However, this process is not so easily described because there are populations that break the mold, and the Irish Catholics are one of them.

America provides a unique opportunity to explore the process of immigration assimilation because the founders of America were themselves immigrants. Anglo-Saxon Protestants came from Europe to escape political repression and religious persecution.

Since that time, America continues to be a destination for people who are seeking a new place with new freedoms, not dissimilar to the Anglo-Saxon's initial impetus. Although the colonizers were technically immigrants themselves, they were the first to establish a new society. In this new society, they placed themselves as the dominant, unmarked group from which all other new comers to America are considered distinctly ethnic. Anglo-Saxons were the standard of what it meant to be *American*. Thus, according to Pye, every group immigrating to the US must adapt to the Anglo-Saxon standards in the society if they want to be fully a part of America.

There are steps to the process of assimilation. People cannot merely declare that they disregard their ethnic socialization and agree to encompass themselves in all things American for them to be accepted. In fact, it is less important for the ethnic group to perceive themselves as American; conversely, it is more important for Americans to perceive the ethnic group as an insider. In order to have the opportunities and life chances of the dominant group, one must have approval of the inside group, and moreover, there must be a perceived similarity between the two groups. This inside, and ethnically unmarked group are Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This barrier proved to be particularly difficult for the Irish immigrants because an essential part of their ethnic identity was in direct conflict with Anglo-Saxon Protestants, Catholicism. Irish immigrants were devout and practicing Roman Catholics when they immigrated to the US during the mid 1800s, and this created a significant obstacle in their path to becoming American.<sup>1</sup>

Before discussing the exact historical events, which led to the eventual Irish assimilation into mainstream American identity, it is pertinent to discuss the nature of the process of assimilation in order to trace the evolution of Irish acceptance. Assimilation is a complex process with two distinct aspects referred to as "behavioral" and "structural".<sup>2</sup>

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Edward M Levine, *The Irish and Irish Politicians: a Study of Cultural and Social Alienation* (Notre Dame [Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

Milton Myron Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

The first indicates the “adoption of the cultural behavior pattern of the ‘host’ society.”<sup>3</sup> In essence, the newcomers begin to identify with the national symbols. Edward Levine was an elected committeeman of the Fifth Ward Regular Democratic Organization in Chicago in 1960 and wrote the book *The Irish and Irish Politicians* in response to his experiences. In his book he compares the adoption of American behavioral patterns to be similar to an immigrant saying, “I am an American” and saluting the flag and honoring national holidays. In essence, showing patriotism for America “in both action and attitude”. Nonetheless, there is no meaningful social contract with the dominant group of society. There may be an embracing of certain values and practices of American society, but it is a relatively superficial advancement. Behavioral assimilation echoes Pye’s explanation of acculturation because it involves the conformity to a certain group’s beliefs and practices, *not* the harmony of different cosmologies.

“Structural” assimilation offers a more transformative step for ethnic groups toward receiving acceptance. It offers “the social engagement of the immigrant group with the cliques, organizations, institutional activities, and general civic life of the receiving society.”<sup>4</sup> This creates a more enduring social relationship because it involves the socialization of individuals into the interworking of a society.<sup>5</sup> They become part of the great machine that keeps a society working and functioning. By working alongside members of the unmarked social group they create a purpose and important role for themselves in society. For example, Irish immigrants found jobs such as fireman, policemen, and other public works and municipal government jobs. By the mid to late 1900s five out of six NYPD officers were Irish. Furthermore, even after efforts to desegregate the enforcement field, forty-two percent of the NYPD were Irish

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Levine, *The Irish and Irish Politicians*, p. 70.

Gordon, *Assimilation in America*.

Levine, *The Irish and Irish Politicians*, p. 71.

Americans.<sup>6</sup> This was a vital step in the group's structural assimilation because it began to secure a meaningful role in American society.

By the mid 1900s and maybe even earlier, Irish Americans were perceived as being on the inside of American culture. They were no longer ethnically distinct, or regarded as outsiders. The theory of behavioral and structural assimilation is useful because it helps to describe a common theme among immigrant groups. However, I am of two minds about Pye and Gordon's assertions that immigrant groups assimilate by discarding their ethnic identities and adopting the characteristics of the new nation. On the one hand, I agree that this is a reasonable assumption based on reoccurring instances over the course of history. On the other hand, Irish Americans provide a case study that is an exception to this pattern.

Irish Americans provide a unique exception to the general trend of immigrant experience. According to Pye and Gordon's models along the course of assimilation the Irish would have had to abandon their Catholic faith. As we see today, that is not what happened. The Irish did not completely acclimate to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethic, and if so, according to either theory they are therefore not technically *American*.

Although I agree that for the most part ethnic peoples shed certain parts of their previous identity and adapt to American socialization, it is clear, by using the Irish as an example, that the dominant group also accommodates certain aspects of some ethnic groups. In essence, it is not one group capitulating to another indefinitely. There is interchange and malleability to the boundaries of what defines someone as American. Catholicism is now seen as an inherent American value which is a significant adaptation considering the Founding Fathers came to America in search of freedom from oppression.

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Richard Bessel and Clive Emsley, *Patterns of Provocation: Police and Public Disorder* (2000), 87.

Early Census collections lack proper data to compare religious affiliation and whether Catholicism specifically played a major part in the early marginalization of Irish immigrants.<sup>7</sup> However, a report from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in 1964 surveyed over 2,000 Catholic Americans, and estimated there were about 8,300,000 Catholic Irish in America.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Census identified 13,282,000 total Irish immigrants.<sup>9</sup> This surprising finding suggests that close to 40 percent of Irish in America were not Catholic, but instead Protestant. Other sources authenticate this finding suggesting that the actual percentage may be closer to 50.<sup>10</sup> This data counters the assumption that to be Irish is to be strictly Catholic. Fallows reports, in *Irish Americans* published in 1979, that this discrepancy between the perceived identity of the Irish in America is because Protestant Irish are “disproportionately rural and southern, the best estimate is that 80 to 90 percent are descendants of the Ulster migration of the 1700s or emigrants from Southern Ireland who had converted to Protestantism during the Penal times and filtered into the South and Appalachian districts...” He goes on to say that the remaining 10 to 20 percent probably converted to Protestantism due to the lack of support for the Catholic Church in the South at this time. The Census data reveals that two groups constitute what most people place under the universal umbrella of *Irish*. It becomes important to determine whether there are two distinct groups, or whether the Protestants are considered a subset of Irish Catholics.

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Marjorie R Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1979).

Harold Abramson, *Ethnic Diversity in Catholic America* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), 19.

Ibid., p. 19.

Ibid., p. 19.

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF IN-MARRIAGE BY NATIONAL  
ORIGIN GROUPS, 1870, 1900, 1930, 1940, 1950

National Origin Group	Total	1870	1900	1930	1940	1950	Males, 1870-1950	Females, 1870-1950
Jewish.....	94.86	100.00	98.82	95.00	93.70	94.90	94.42	95.30
Italian.....	83.92	.....	97.71	86.71	81.89	76.70	83.45	84.40
British-American..	64.07	92.31	72.00	58.82	54.56	54.25	62.20	66.08
Irish.....	63.38	93.05	74.75	74.25	45.06	50.00	68.58	58.91
Polish.....	55.58	.....	100.00	68.04	52.78	40.74	59.07	52.48
German.....	45.76	86.07	55.26	39.84	27.19	27.40	44.28	47.34
Scandinavian.....	38.87	40.00	82.76	33.33	18.46	22.22	39.02	31.71
Total.....	69.15	91.20	75.93	65.80	63.64	61.24	.....	.....
Male.....	69.46	91.74	75.45	65.85	63.12	62.45	.....	.....
Female.....	68.63	90.65	76.41	65.75	63.66	60.08	.....	.....

The distinct nature of Protestantism and Catholicism support the belief that it is unlikely that these two categories were conceptually fused under the same social group. One way to determine the strength of an ethnic group's solidarity is to look at marriage patterns. The more endogamous a group is, marrying within their ethnic group, one can deduce that there is strong allegiance and perceived common identity among them. On the other hand, a high rate of exogamy, marrying outside the ethnic group, reveals a weaker sense of identity and more permeable social relationships with other groups. Ruby Kennedy recorded the percent distributions of endogamous relationships between 1870 and 1950 among the most populous immigrant groups in America.

Kennedy's data, excerpted from *Single or Triple Melting Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven II*, shows that by the 1950s Jewish Americans were the most endogamous group averaging 95 percent, meaning that an average of 95 percent of Jewish Americans married other Jewish Americans between the years 1870 and 1950. Italian Americans averaged 84 percent, British Americans averaged 64 percent, followed by Irish Americans with 63 percent. Irish Americans began in 1870 with an average of 93 percent endogamy, but by 1950, only 50 percent were endogamous. Data from the

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Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, "Single or Triple Melting-Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940," *The American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 4 (January 1944): 333.

Census from 1966 follows this trend of decreased endogamy within ethnic groups as America enters deeper into the 1900s. The Irish have the lowest percent of endogamous marriages with 32 percent, compared to 34 percent for Germans, 41 percent for Polish, and 53 percent for Italians. Note, however, that Kennedy does not distinguish between Protestant and Catholic Irish. Fallows uses Census data to deduce “if the Catholic Irish constitute roughly half of the Census data, then clearly the Protestant Irish must have a lower percentage –perhaps as low as 22 percent.” This implies the relative disappearance of any ethnically distinct Protestant Irish group. For all intents and purposes they have merged into the Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity. This ties back with Pye’s assertion that for an ethnic group to be assimilated completely they have to assume the same identity as the host group. I believe the invisible Irish Protestant population was overlooked because they shared a critical aspect with the Anglo-Saxon’s, Protestantism. It is possible that this proved to be a more important similarity that made it feasible to overlook the fact that they were Irish. For some reason or another this significant portion of Irish immigrants, nearly half, was not stigmatized as much as their Catholic brothers.

If in fact it is true that the Protestant Irish were more easily assimilated into dominant American culture as to be nearly forgotten in the minds of Americans, then it is reasonable to assume that there would be different patterns in social mobility between the Protestant and Catholic Irish immigrants. The more marginalized a group is the less chances they have of social mobility, and the previous data suggests that Protestants were essentially completely acculturated by the mid 60s. The Catholic Irish were significantly assimilated as well, for they too had low rates of endogamy, but not *as* low as the Protestants. This difference in degrees of assimilation should logically manifest itself in aspects of life such as education, income, and occupational prestige. The more acculturated group, the Protestants, presumably have education patterns, income rates, and occupation prestige similar to the dominant group of which they are now essentially a

part. However, the Census data comparing education, occupational prestige, and income for Irish Catholics, Irish Protestants, and British Protestants comes as a surprise.

Irish Catholics emerge as the “super achievers” according to the 12 national surveys conducted in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Across the board Irish Catholics out rank Irish Protestants and British Protestants. The mean years of education were 12.5, 10.9, and 12.4 respectively with a national average of 11.5; occupational prestige of the head of the household (0-99) was 43.7 for Catholics, 36.7 for Protestants, 43.9 for British Protestants, with a national average of 41.8; lastly, average family income (1974 dollars) was 12,426 for Catholics, 9,147 for Protestants, 10,354 for British Protestants, with a national average of 10,623.<sup>13</sup> Irish Catholics consistently ranked above not only the national average but also the ethnically unmarked group, Anglo-Saxon (or British) Protestants. This ranking directly contradicts Pye and Gordon’s theories about immigrant groups. Not only are the Irish Catholics not completely capitulating to the Protestant American views, but they outperform them in the categories described. This discovery further complicates any presumed pattern of immigrant assimilation.

By now it is evident that other factors compounded the assimilation of Irish Catholics into America and their experience is not easily predicted. The stereotype of lazy Irish Catholics, ill equipped to work and perform in high jobs is disproved by the mid 1900s. As I have showed, they are outperforming not only the national averages but also more importantly the Anglo-Saxons. One possible factor for the Irish’s relentless struggle to fit into America, comes from an understanding of what they left behind in Ireland. The Great Irish Famine of 1845 to 1848 resulted in the immigration of around one million people from a population that was no more than eight million to begin

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Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation*, p. 67.

Ambramson, *Ethnic Diversity in Catholic America*, p. 29.



with.<sup>14</sup> Fleeing from starvation and wreckage at home, for the next half-century Irish peasants sought protection in America. Most immigrants settled in the urban areas where they became laborers. This adaptation to rough urban life having recently escaped a crisis back in Ireland left the group with determination to never run the risk of being trapped in such rural poverty. The Protestant Irish on the other hand emigrated earlier and chose to settle in more rural areas, which were initially less *socially traumatic*.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, they suffered later from isolation. This is one of the social reasons why the Irish Catholic did surprisingly well in a situation where they were predicted to fail.

A critical aspect in Irish immigrant structural assimilation was their early participation in government. Beginning in municipal government positions and government jobs such as policemen, and firemen, the Irish began to wedge their way into the forefront of American politics. Andrew Jackson's presidency in the 1830s established the Democratic Party that would become the center of Irish politics. The Irish had an advantage over other immigrants in their ability to participate in politics because they spoke English. While immigrants have to struggle to learn and understand a new place as well as a foreign language, the Irish had the upper hand of being able to immediately understand the language of America. By the 1950s, the Irish were ready to try for the highest political bid, presidency. If they could get an Irish Roman Catholic man into the white house, then the step of structural assimilation would be complete. To have a person of an ethnic group in command of the country symbolizes American trust and acceptance of that group to the highest degree. Fallows captures the importance of this election in Irish history in America, "By the time John F. Kennedy moved to the White House...[it]

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Levine, *The Irish and Irish Politicians*, p. 53.

Follows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation*, p. 67.

told the American Irish that not only their power but their Irishness had been symbolically legitimized. Such a feat set a precedent that will hold for all time.”<sup>16</sup>

There are many reasons as to why Irish Catholics defy the patterns of immigration. The behavioral and structural model of assimilation according to Gordon predicts that for the Irish to find a lasting place in American society they must lose Catholicism and replace it with American ideology. Contrary to his belief the Irish Catholics were able to become part of America while still holding on to their religious values. The reason is in part because they were able to structurally assimilate into the American economy and politics, thus, making them not easily replaceable. The final step of having an Irish Catholic president, cracks the homogeneity of America because for the first time, Irish and Americans identify and stand behind someone who is Irish but no longer seen as ethnically distinct. Although the Irish represent a deviation from immigrant assimilation patterns, they are one of the few. Other ethnicities such as Mexicans and African Americans did not have the same opportunities or circumstances as the Irish, and they are still fighting for acceptance.

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Follows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation*, p. 67.