

Preface

Weeks after this book was substantially out of our hands, making its way from editor to editor and then to press, we found ourselves still combing the newspapers, the magazines, and the Internet, to say nothing of the social scientific literature, for news from the ethnic and racial frontiers of the world. This impulse to keep gathering material reflects in part a continuing search for ammunition for argument, for new mysteries or old puzzles, for information or ideas that might help in the quest for understanding, a quest that seldom ends with the completion of such a project. But part of it is simply habit. When you begin to pay focused attention to a topic, trying to think it through, your radar tends to expand in both sensitivity and reach. You become a compulsive reader, and it takes a while to wind back down again, to return the system to the less focused and more casual sweeping of the horizon that constitutes the everyday observational life of most members of society.

Among the gleanings from the first few months of 1997: reports of ethnic insurgency in western China; a piece on the likelihood that Whites will become a minority in California; an item on army efforts to subdue ethnic rebellion in urban areas of Indonesia; a report on the outrage expressed by Russian Americans over ethnic slurs in the wake of the arrest of a Russian immigrant for the murder of entertainer Bill Cosby's son; an item on the successful effort of an English-descent Australian to pass off her own art as the work of an Aborigine, one of Australia's indigenous people, angrily described as "culture theft"; news of recurrent ethnic violence in northeastern India; a passionate, at times furious discussion of the pros and cons of interracial adoption; a piece on the disputed ethnicity of Russia's Cossacks and their efforts to gain recognition as a distinct people; numerous reports on the near-fatal beating of a Black boy by three White teenagers in Chicago; and so on.

It is sobering to undertake a book about topics that arouse as much passion as is evident in these stories and others like them. Ethnicity and race touch deep feelings in many people around the globe and occupy

much of the world's attention. One of our purposes is to understand why, but we would be the first to admit that in the process of writing this book, we have sometimes found ourselves with questions for which we have no answers.

Be that as it may, we want to point out four features of what we offer here. First, the book is *global* in scope. As the gleanings from our media radar suggest, ethnic and racial frontiers—by which we mean the places where ethnicity and race are making waves and, in turn, are themselves being made and remade—today can be found virtually everywhere. This book consciously acknowledges that fact. One of the goals of the **Sociology for a New Century** series is to present sociological thinking that is focused less exclusively on the United States and is more attentive to the diversities and continuities in social life around the world. In the field of ethnicity and race, we believe such a perspective is particularly important. Despite the global distribution of ethnic and racial phenomena, much theorizing about ethnicity and race has been based on the U.S. experience. This is understandable. One reviewer of some of our work even argued that ethnicity is a useless concept outside the United States and that the only ethnic groups in the United States are those of European descent. Our disagreement with this view should be amply apparent throughout this book—see Chapter 2 in particular—but it remains the case that the concept of ethnicity was taken up by social science in an attempt to understand American situations and gained much of its currency in an American context. Furthermore, the legacy of conquest, slavery, and large-scale immigration has required Americans of all backgrounds to confront race, racism, and intergroup relations in forms and with an urgency that many western nations, whose racial “others” for a long time were largely in colonies thousands of miles away, have only recently experienced.

But the making of ethnic and racial identities is a process apparent around the globe. This invites social science to adopt a broad perspective on these topics and to do the kind of comparative work that will help us to distinguish among localized patterns and the factors that produce them. This book is not systematically comparative, but it does attempt that broad perspective. Although the experience of the United States looms large here—each of us has done research largely on American topics—our intention has been to bring in as much of the rest of the world as possible, and thereby, through cases and illustration, to enrich our understanding of ethnicity and race everywhere. Indeed, we believe that the study of U.S. cases can be advanced partly by looking elsewhere, avoiding the parochialism that often limits the American vision of these phenomena.

Our approach is global in another way as well. It pays particular attention to the fact that the dynamics of ethnicity and race are inextricably linked with macro-historical forces that are global in their reach. These forces—rationalization, industrialization, urbanization, and other developments; in short, the project of modernity—have shaped the context in which contemporary ethnic and racial identities are made and remade, and have provided much of the social and cultural foundations on which those identities are formed.

Second, we have a particular understanding of *the relationship between ethnicity and race*. Some scholars have seen these as referring to very different phenomena. Some have seen race as a subset of ethnicity. Some have seen them as virtually the same. Our own approach, detailed in Chapter 2, sees ethnicity and race as referring to distinct but often overlapping bases of identification. They also potentially involve two different processes of identity construction. Either one may be rooted in assignment by others, but when groups assert their own identities, filling them with their own content, they are acting in classically ethnic ways. Thus, a race may be, but is not necessarily, at the same time an ethnic group, and an ethnic group may be, but is not necessarily, at the same time a race.

This approach departs from some that distinguish between ethnicity and race in terms of power. Such approaches generally argue that race typically is a product of differential power relations and that most ethnic identities are more likely to be matters of choice and convenience. One of the drawbacks of focusing on the American experience is that it can be seen to support this distinction, which fails to hold up in much of the rest of the world. The contrast between ethnicity and race, which sometimes seems unambiguous in the American context, begins to break down or become inverted elsewhere. In Rwanda, for example—a case we discuss in more detail in Chapter 3—it is ethnic rather than racial ties that are directly linked with privilege and power and have become lethally consequential in people's lives. The qualities and consequences associated with race in one context may be associated with ethnicity in another.

Third, our focus is on ethnic and racial *identities*. Although we discuss the dynamics of intergroup relations and ethnic and racial stratification in various parts of the book, our primary concern is with processes of group formation and identity construction: the ways that people come to conceptualize themselves and others—and to act—in ethnic and racial terms. By adopting this focus, we do not mean to minimize or dismiss the important role that these phenomena play in organizing intergroup social life. The concrete consequences of ethnicity and race, the purposes they serve, and their implications in systems of power are crucial

elements in much of our discussion. What is more, our own explanation of why these phenomena are powerful features of the contemporary global landscape is predicated directly on our understanding of the crucial functions that they serve. But our emphasis is not so much on what ethnicity and race do in societies as on how ethnic and racial identities come into being in the first place, and on the social processes by which they are reproduced and transformed. Our purpose is to bring out the bases on which ethnic and racial groups form and act as groups.

This directs our attention to the collective forms of these identities. Although the acquisition of an ethnic or racial identity by individuals is a critical part of collective identity, we pay little attention here to the social psychology of individual identity formation. Our concern is with the processes by which ethnic and racial designations come to be asserted by or assigned to particular groups: the construction of “we” and “they.”

Of course, individual and collective aspects of identity and identity construction are often closely linked and mutually supporting. Much of what we have to say in this book about collective identity may resonate with many readers’ individual experiences; certainly we hope so. However, in some circumstances the two levels may not fit together at all or may even be in conflict. For example, in a rapidly changing, multiethnic, multiracial society such as the United States, many individuals are not automatically channeled into one ethnic or racial identity. Some may be assigned to different identities at different times; others may have choices to make or options to exercise. But again, although these processes of individual assertion or assignment are interesting and important, our focus is on the making of the larger identities that are asserted or assigned.

Finally, our approach is *constructionist*. It treats ethnicity and race—both as general categories and as specific identities—not as natural phenomena but as human creations, as produced by groups of human beings trying to solve problems, defend or enhance their positions, justify their actions, establish meanings, achieve understanding, or otherwise negotiate their way through the world in which they live. This constructionist view of ethnicity and race is one of the chief advances in the social scientific understanding of these phenomena in recent years, and we consciously adopt and build on it. But we also depart from it in certain ways. Many constructionist accounts end up being reductionist, seeing ethnicity and race as by-products of more fundamental economic, political, or social forces. As those forces change, so do their ethnic and racial products. Ethnicity and race thus become epiphenomenal, with little independent influence on social life. We see this view as incomplete. Ethnic and racial identities, once established, have impacts of their own; further-

more, for many people they carry an emotional charge that cannot be accounted for by appeals to interests alone. Our effort in what follows is to show how ethnicity and race are not only products but also producers of social relations and collective action.