1

The Puzzle of Ethnicity and Race

Despite predictions to the contrary, the 20th century has turned out to be an ethnic century. The conflicts and claims organized at least partly in ethnic or racial terms are legion, but consider a few examples:

- During World War II, Germany's Nazi regime undertook the systematic extermination of Europe's Jewish population, along with Gypsies and other "undesirables." Six million people died as a direct result of this "holocaust," which gave to the world indelible images of brutality and evil and became one of the defining events of the modern era.
- In 1960, the African state of Nigeria won its independence from Great Britain, but conflicts over the distribution of power among ethnic groups and regions erupted soon afterward. In 1967, in the most dramatic and costly of these, the Igbo people of the southeastern part of the country declared their area the independent Republic of Biafra, precipitating nearly 3 years of open warfare with the Nigerian government. Biafra eventually lost the war, but not before hundreds of thousands of Igbos and other Nigerians had been killed.
- In the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, ethnic political mobilization seemed to be happening everywhere as an array of ethnic and racial groups not only loudly proclaimed their distinctive identities but also struggled for recognition, rights, and resources. Ethnic and racial boundaries surfaced both as primary sources of identity and as major fault lines within U.S. society, from the civil rights sit-ins and riots in Black ghettoes to the legal efforts of the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund to the confrontations led by the American Indian Movement to the angry protests of an assortment of European-ancestry groups. At century's end, those fault lines remain, and many racial and ethnic identities seem as important in American life as they ever did.

- In 1971, the government of Malaysia amended that country's constitution, adopted at independence from Great Britain in 1957, to secure the preferential treatment of Malays in education, business, and government, against the objections of the sizable Chinese and other ethnic populations. Among other things, the changes made it an act of sedition to even question such entitlements.
- In the late 1970s, on the Gulf coast of Texas, competition over scarce fishing resources led to violence between Euro-Americans and immigrant Vietnamese. A White fisherman was killed, Vietnamese fishing boats were burned, and eventually the Ku Klux Klan joined the fray. Many Vietnamese immigrants finally fled the region.
- In the 1980s and 1990s, minority Tamils launched a violent insurgency against the majority Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, an island nation off the southeastern coast of India, crippling its economy and killing thousands. As we approach the 21st century, Sri Lanka's seemingly insoluble "ethnic fratricide" (Tambiah 1986) continues.
- The 1991 disintegration of the Soviet Union—one of the world's most ethnically diverse states—pried open the lid of what was supposedly a socialist melting pot, to reveal a boiling stew of ethnic sentiments and political movements. Ethnic conflicts followed in several regions of the former Soviet Union. Among them are the following: Ukrainian and Russian minorities in Moldova battled against majority Romanians, Abkhazians and southern Ossetians struggled for their own independence in newly independent Georgia, Armenians and Azerbaijanis fought over territorial rights and occupancy, and Chechens envisioned independence from Russia and entered a devastating war in their efforts to achieve it.
- The decade of the 1990s has seen a flurry of attacks by German skinheads and other right-wing groups directed against Turks, Greeks, Spaniards, North Africans of various ethnicities, and other immigrant groups who came to Germany over the preceding three decades in search of jobs. Arsonists torched immigrant-occupied apartment houses; men, women, and children have been beaten on the street; and dozens of foreigners have been killed.
- In the fall of 1993, in a special issue devoted to multiculturalism in America, *Time* magazine published a story titled "The Politics of

Separation." The subject was the impact of growing ethnic diversity on U.S. campuses. The magazine reported a perception among some students that "to study anyone's culture but one's own . . . is to commit an act of identity suicide" (W. Henry 1993:75).

- In October of 1995, French Canadians in the province of Quebec came within a few votes of deciding that the province should separate from the rest of Canada, in all likelihood eventually becoming an independent country. "We were defeated by money and the ethnic vote," said the province's premier, a leading separatist, referring to the non-French-speaking voters of various ethnicities who narrowly defeated the separatist effort (Farnsworth 1995:1). Before the vote, the Crees, an indigenous people living within the province, took out a full-page advertisement in newspapers across the country announcing their own overwhelming vote against Quebec's separation. The Crees promised that if Quebec were to separate, they and the vast lands under their control in turn would separate from Quebec, remaining part of Canada.
- In the early and mid-1990s, the term *ethnic cleansing* emerged from the chaos of warfare that followed the breakup of the former Yugoslav federation in southern Europe and engulfed the nascent country of Bosnia. The term, coined by Serbian nationalists, referred to the forced removal of non-Serbs from territory claimed or sought by Serbs. It was accompanied in the Bosnian case by wholesale human slaughter, starvation, and rampages of sexual violence directed against Bosnian Muslims by Serbian and Croatian soldiers and civilians. As one commentator pointed out, "ethnic cleansing" had now joined "the euphemistic lexicon of zealotry," along with Nazi descriptions of the Jewish Holocaust as "the final solution" (Williams 1993:H-3).

These examples admittedly focus on conflict and division, which are not the whole of the ethnic story. Ethnic and racial diversity and identity have been sources of pride, unity, and achievement. When the U.S. women's gymnastics team won a gold medal at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, the ethnic composition of the team—"an Asian American, an African American, and white girls with names like Miller and Moceanu" (Lexington 1996)—was itself viewed as an American accomplishment, something the entire nation should look upon with pride. Ethnic bonds brought Germans together in a reunified country in 1990, after decades of division into East and West. Mexico proudly proclaims its multiracial

heritage, which mixes Indian and Spanish blood and cultures. Ethnic festivals, foods, and customs continue to enrich the life of numerous U.S. and Canadian cities and the lives of group members themselves. The Kwanzaa festival, for example, has become an annual African American celebration, a time for family, reflection, and rededication. In Nigeria, long troubled by ethnic tensions and conflict, novelist Wole Soyinka (1996) argues that Nigeria's viability as a state depends on learning to reconcile and even celebrate its ethnic diversity. On U.S. college campuses, in corporations, and in major cities, leaders dealing with ethnic and racial issues argue that diversity should be a strength, not a weakness.

Whether ethnicity is a division or a bond, the point is the same: As these and a hundred other examples from around the world illustrate, at century's end ethnic and racial identities have emerged as among the most potent forces in contemporary societies. They have become sources of pride, vehicles of political assertion, foundations of unity, and reservoirs of destructive power. (The map of the world in Figure 1.1 shows the locations of all the countries mentioned in the examples used in this book.)

An Unexpected Persistence and Power

It was not supposed to be this way. Ethnicity was expected to disappear as a force to be reckoned with in the 20th century. The latter half of the century, by numerous accounts, was supposed to see the end—or certainly a dramatic attenuation—of ethnic and racial ties. As the century wore on, these and other seemingly parochial and even premodern attachments were expected to decline as bases of human consciousness and action, being replaced by other, more comprehensive identities linked to the vast changes shaping the modern world.

Certainly a good many sociologists expected as much. As early as 1926, Robert Park, a professor at the University of Chicago and perhaps the most influential American sociologist of his day, observed that certain forces at work in the world were bound to dismantle the prejudices and boundaries that separated races and peoples. Powerful global factors, argued Park—trade, migration, new communication technologies, even the cinema—were bringing about a vast "interpenetration of peoples." These factors, he claimed, "enforce new contacts and result in new forms of competition and of conflict. But out of this confusion and ferment, new and more intimate forms of association arise." Indeed, wrote Park, "In the relations of races there is a cycle of events which tends everywhere to

FIGURE 1.1

Approximate Locations of Countries or Regions Mentioned in the Book

repeat itself. . . . The race relations cycle which takes the form, to state it abstractly, of contacts, competition, accommodation and eventual assimilation, is apparently progressive and irreversible" (Park 1926/1950:150).

Park wrote at a time when the term *race* had a broader meaning than it does now. Park's conception of "races" treated separately, for example, the Slavic peoples, Jews, Chinese, Japanese, Puerto Ricans, Portuguese, and others (Park 1934, 1939; see also Banton 1983, chap. 3). Today, if we were to encounter these peoples in communities outside their countries of origin, we would consider them ethnic groups or would combine them into more inclusive racial categories: Japanese and Chinese as Asians, for example, and Slavic peoples and Portuguese as Whites.

Embedded in Park's ideas is a clear sense of transformation. The forces of history already were transforming the world's peoples, and the rest of the 20th century would only accelerate the process. The impact would integrate peoples with one another, leading ultimately to universal participation in a common life and culture. "If America was once in any exclusive sense the melting pot of races," wrote Park in 1926, "it is no longer. The melting pot is the world" (1926/1950:149).

Not everyone saw things quite this way. More skeptical voices could be heard in the sociological chorus in the early decades of the 20th century (see Berry 1965:129-35). Park, however, articulated an increasingly widespread view about the future of the world and in particular about the future of industrial, multiethnic societies such as the United States. Over time, they would become less "multi" and less ethnic. The melting pot—both global and local—would work its magic, and the peoples of the world would be integrated into a broad stream of shared culture and social relations. "Everywhere there is competition and conflict; but everywhere the intimacies which participation in a common life enforces have created new accommodation, and relations which once were merely formal or utilitarian have become personal and human" (Park 1926/1950:149).

Park was much influenced in his thinking by studies of the immigrant experience in North America. He and his fellow social scientists at the University of Chicago paid great attention to the stream of migrants from the various countries of Europe who, late in the 19th and early in the 20th centuries, poured into the growing cities and insatiable labor markets of the industrializing United States. They found that gradually, over time and through generations, these immigrants learned English, sent their children to school, struggled for economic and political success, spread across the continent, replaced customs from the old country with customs from the new, and began even to marry across the ethnic boundaries

that originally separated them. These early students of European immigration frequently found evidence of Park's proposed sequence: contact with other groups; competition and conflict among them over territory and opportunities; eventual accommodation to one another's presence, character, and interests; and gradual assimilation as newcomers began to participate more and more in the dominant society and its institutions and all came to share in "a common culture and a common historical life" (Park 1926/1950:149).

The idea that ethnic attachments and identities would decline in significance emerged from other contexts as well. In the aftermath of World War II, a good deal of scholarly attention turned to the developing societies of the so-called Third World, many of them struggling for independence from colonial powers and most of them experiencing rapid social change under the massive impacts of industrialization and urbanization (see, for example, Deutsch 1961). Many of these states had been carved out originally through negotiation and conflict among the European colonial powers. Often they were composites of diverse peoples, carriers of distinct cultures and political histories who were brought together by the circumstances of forced colonial appropriation and administrative convenience. Nigeria, for example, which was consolidated as a British colony in 1914, drew under a single administrative umbrella a broad collection of peoples and previously independent kingdoms: Fulani, Igbo, Tiv, Ijaw, Oyo, and many others (Young 1976).

A common assumption from the late 1940s to at least the early 1960s was that the ethnic identities of these peoples would disappear gradually as the colonies or newly independent countries they were now part of continued to develop. Urbanization would bring members of these various groups together in cities where they would mingle, intermarry, and exchange ideas, losing touch with their regions of origin. Growing markets for industrial labor would be indifferent to the origins of the workers they attracted, treating group members indiscriminately as individuals and mixing them in the workplace, leveling their differences. The new technologies of mass communication would leap across the parochialisms of tribal connection and local experience, linking people to people and idea to idea on a scale never before seen in these countries. Expanded and modernized educational systems would teach them a common language, a common body of knowledge, and a common culture, fostering a shared and broadened consciousness of self and society. The political processes of nation-building would bind their loyalties to rising new states, institutionalizing a comprehensive new identity and undermining older ties to kinship, local community, and traditional cultures (for example,

see Black 1966; Deutsch 1966; McCall 1955; Pye 1966). All of this might take time—after all, some groups surely would resist these changes (Eisenstadt and Rokkan 1973)—but the modernizing dynamic would prevail. In Nigeria, for example, the Tiv and the Ijaw and all the others would become Nigerians before long, not only by virtue of the formalities of independence and citizenship, but also through a newly comprehensive political and cultural consciousness. In this view, ethnicity was merely part of "the unfinished business for political modernizers" (Burgess 1978:272), certain to be finished before long.

Finally, the expectation that ethnic and racial attachments would decline found support in some of the classical sources of sociological thought. Karl Marx's radical historical vision saw capitalism as the hammer that eventually would pulverize ties of nationality or tribe, fashioning in their stead the iron bonds of class, linking people to each other on the basis of their positions in the process of economic production. By the 1960s, a growing body of work in the social sciences, influenced in part by Marxist analyses, was displaying this "radical expectancy" (Glazer and Moynihan 1975:7), the belief that class interests would emerge as the bedrock of collective identity and political consciousness, displacing alternative bases of action. As capitalism developed around the world, other sources of group ties—language, religion, national origin, and the like—would disappear or at least become far less significant. Persons and groups would discover that their "true" interests were defined by their positions in productive processes or markets, and they would reconceptualize and reorganize themselves along class lines.[1]

Another European social thinker, Max Weber, agreed that ethnicity would decline in importance but envisioned a different mechanism at work. For Weber, the rationalization of human action and organization was the hallmark of modernity. Ethnicity, in contrast, was a communal relationship. It was based not on the rational calculation of interest but on subjective feelings among group members "that they belong together" (Weber 1968:40). As modernity and hence rationalization progressed, thought Weber, communal relationships would be displaced. Only where "rationally-regulated action is not widespread"—that is, where modernization had yet to take root—would such relationships remain compelling (p. 389). In the Weberian scheme, "ethnicity could hardly be expected to survive the great tidal wave of bureaucratic rationality sweeping over the western world" (Parkin 1979:32). Weber's and Marx's ideas, although very different, had similar implications: Over time, ethnicity and race would decline as significant social forces in the modern

world. This line of thinking was by no means entirely wrong. Immigrants often did adopt the practices and ideas of the societies they entered; political and economic development in the Third World did transform social relations, daily experience, and even identities; and as capitalism developed, class-based interests, cutting across ethnic, racial, and other boundaries, often did become mobilized into political conflict. Somehow, however, the decline of ethnic and racial attachments failed to follow, at least on a large scale. Indeed, the last third of the 20th century made a shambles of these projections. In recent decades, far from disappearing, ethnicity has been resurgent around the world—often, as the preceding examples make clear, with lethal consequences. As Donald Horowitz wrote in 1985, "Ethnicity is at the center of politics in country after country, a potent source of challenges to the cohesion of states and of international tension. . . . [It] has fought and bled and burned its way into public and scholarly consciousness" (p. xi).

In short, modernity—that gradual and eventually global process by which industrialization, urbanization, mass communications, and other institutional changes transformed human life and society—was supposed to bring an end to ethnicity. The phenomenon was supposed to go away. But the predictions did not come true. It turned out to be an ethnic century after all.

This book is an attempt to understand why. Why have ethnicity and race, defying predictions, remained such persistent and powerful forces in the modern world?

The Challenge of Diversity

The unexpected persistence of ethnicity is not the only puzzle here. Equally as puzzling and as intellectually challenging is its diversity. The diversity to which we refer has to do not with the variety of peoples in the world or with their interactions; it is not the diversity of a college campus or a developing nation that we have in mind. That the world contains many ethnic groups and a number of races and that these sometimes have difficulty getting along is not particularly astonishing. What is remarkable is the diversity of forms that ethnicity and race seem to take, the variety of functions they apparently serve, and the quite different kinds of attachments that claim the ethnic label.

For example, consider the diverse form that Armenian identity has taken. In 1894, the sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Abd al-Hamid, caught

up in the chaos of a crumbling empire, launched a massacre of the Armenian population in the eastern part of what is now Turkey. The extermination effort continued for more than two decades. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians died, and thousands more fled the country.

A significant number of those Armenians who fled ended up in the United States. By 1900, 12,000 Armenians had taken refuge on American soil; by World War I, there were 60,000. They continued to come, for a variety of reasons and from various parts of the Middle East, up to the present time (Arlen 1975; Bakalian 1992). Somewhere between half a million and a million Armenian Americans live in the United States today, descendants of these immigrants. Many of them are now members of the third or fourth generation on American soil. Anny Bakalian (1992), in her study of Armenian Americans, traces the reconstruction of Armenian identity in these later generations. She describes it as a passage from "being" to "feeling" Armenian. "Being" Armenian referred to sharing a distinct language, living a similar and distinct style of life, carrying a common and identifiably Armenian culture, and living one's life within predominantly Armenian sets of social relations, from marriage to friendship. "Feeling" Armenian is quite different. For American-born generations of Armenians,

> the Armenian language is no longer used as a means of everyday communication. The secular culture, even cuisine, is relegated to special occasions and acquires symbolic connotations. Frequency of attendance at Armenian religious services is gradually reduced, as is participation in communal life and activities sponsored by Armenian voluntary associations. Social ties, even intimate relations and conjugal bonds, with non-Armenians become increasingly the norm. (Bakalian 1993:5-6)

Despite this change, however, Bakalian argues that "the majority of Armenian-Americans, even the great-grandchildren of the immigrant generation, continue to maintain high levels of Armenian identity, fierce pride in their ancestral heritage, and a strong sense of we-ness or peoplehood" (Bakalian 1993:6). They have not lost their identity. They have held onto it, but they also have transformed it.

Joane Nagel (1996:25) invites us to compare this experience of Armenianness with the experience of Armenianness "in Turkey during World War I when Armenians were the targets of pogroms, or in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis fight for control of borders and minority enclaves." Obviously, what it means to be Armenian in each of these times and places is very different,

yet all these persons lay claim to an Armenian identity. Do they actually have much in common, other than the label they attach to their identities? What is the ultimate meaning of Armenianness, embracing as it does such a diverse set of experiences and persons?

So it is with ethnicity more generally. The examples with which we opened this chapter capture ethnic and racial identities at their most dramatic and compelling. The identities in those examples, for the most part, are surrounded by passion and conflict. Not all ethnic and racial identities are experienced this way. Some are quietly assumed or unconsciously left behind. Some are used to mobilize people or register claims; others seem to have no uses at all. For some groups, ethnic or racial background reliably predicts life chances, organizes social relations and daily experience, and plays a prominent role in individual self-concepts. For others, it may do only one or two of these things or none. Some people are reminded of their ethnic or racial identity—proudly, angrily, sadly, or indifferently—every day. Others for the most part ignore it or trot it out on holidays or at family reunions where the old ethnic stories are told for the umpteenth time and the traditional foods get their once-yearly airing. What is more, all these different manifestations of ethnic or racial identity may be apparent within a single group all at once, as some group members build their lives around such an identity and others turn their backs on it, building their lives around another identity altogether. Nor is identity—particularly in the case of race—always a matter of choice. Some can pay their ethnic or racial identity little mind, but others are never allowed to forget it.

Such diversity begs an explanation. Why is ethnicity one thing here, another there, and both things somewhere else? If ethnicity can be so many things, has it any distinctive core at all? As John Comaroff (1991:663) put it, "If the Gods—or social scientists, it makes little difference—do know the answer, maybe they could explain: Why is ethnicity sometimes the basis of bitter conflict, even genocide, while, at other times, it is no more than the stuff of gastronomic totemism?"

Thus, the puzzle of power and persistence is accompanied by the puzzle of variation and change. That second puzzle, too, drives the argument in this book. How are we to account for the rise and fall of ethnic and racial identities and conflicts and for their myriad variations? And what about the future? Will ethnicity and race continue to wield their peculiar power in the 21st century? Powerful or not, what forms will they take, and what consequences will they have for human beings and for society?

Ethnicity and Race as Sociological Topics

In recent decades, it has become apparent that ethnicity and race are among the most common categories that contemporary human beings use to organize their ideas about who they are, to evaluate their experiences and behavior, and to understand the world around them. In some societies, of course, ethnic and racial categories and ties are more salient than in others. It is increasingly evident nevertheless that ethnicity and race are among the fundamental organizing concepts of the contemporary world. That fact alone would make them central topics within sociology.

Ethnicity and race also appear to have striking potency as bases of collective identity and action. The unanticipated and often dramatic staying power of ethnic and racial identities demonstrates as much. Groups organized around ethnicity and race are reshaping societies, upsetting old assumptions, and challenging established systems of power. In essence, they are remaking significant parts of the modern world.

The distinctive contribution of sociology as a discipline has been the study of just such processes: of variously defined groups within society, of intergroup relations, of collective action, and of the multitudinous forces and factors that impinge on these. The study of ethnicity and race, in other words, is a fundamentally sociological enterprise.

One of the great strengths of sociology has been its insistence on placing social phenomena within broad social and historical contexts. From its beginnings in the classical works of 19th- and early 20th-century thinkers, sociology has been preoccupied with social change on a grand scale, in particular with the onset of modernity and industrialism and with their diverse effects on human relationships and on the human search for meaning, community, order, and understanding.

Ethnicity and race are arenas in which those relationships and that search are continually in flux. They have to do with fundamental group processes: how human beings come to see themselves and others in particular ways, how they come to act on those perceptions, and how their understandings and actions are shaped by social and historical forces. Two very different—if typically related—sets of factors are at work in those processes. One set consists of the attributes, resources, and ideas of groups themselves; the other consists of the environment that those groups encounter. To understand ethnicity and race, therefore, we have to study both composition and context. We have to look both at what groups bring with them to their encounters with other people and with

the world around them, and what the world that they encounter consists of. We need to understand both how people interpret and negotiate their lives in ethnic or racial ways, and how larger historical and social forces organize the arenas and terms in which those people act, encouraging or discouraging the interpretations they make, facilitating some forms of organization and action and hindering others.

These issues and concerns also shape the inquiry in this book, most of which has do in one way or another with the following questions.

- What is it that makes ethnicity and race such powerful bases of identity and action, and how do we explain their striking diversity?
- How are ethnic and racial identities constructed, maintained, and transformed?
- Under what conditions are ethnic or racial forms of identification and action likely to arise?
- What will happen to ethnicity and race in the future? Will they survive as prominent organizational themes in the modern world? Or will the 21st century finally realize the misplaced predictions of the 20th century and see the demise of ethnicity and race as bases of identity and action?

An Outline of What Follows

We begin our approach to these questions with definitions. Chapter 2 maps the confusing terrain of ethnicity, race, and nationalism; discusses the ways these terms are commonly used (and confused); and provides the definitions that are used throughout this book.

Chapter 3 then examines the two models of ethnic and racial identities that have organized a great deal of social scientific thinking in recent years, commonly known as the primordialist and circumstantialist accounts. We situate these schools of thought in the context of global change, discuss their strengths and weaknesses, and suggest that they may be less diametrically opposed to each other than is generally assumed.

Chapter 4 lays out the key elements of a constructionist conception of ethnicity. It uses pieces of both primordialist and circumstantialist perspectives to account for the power of ethnic and racial identities and for their persistence and variation but adds to those perspectives a central concern with the ways that groups participate in the construction of their own (and others') identities.

In Chapter 5, we illustrate some constructions of ethnic and racial identities through a series of case studies, both historical and contemporary. The emphasis in these narratives is on the interplay between group characteristics and ideas, on one hand, and contextual factors, on the other, in the making and remaking of identity.

Chapters 6 and 7 take up the elements involved in the construction of ethnicity and race more systematically and in more detail. Chapter 6 examines the arenas of social life—the construction sites—where ethnic and racial identities are built and transformed and the ways that contextual factors shape those constructions. Chapter 7 examines the materials that groups bring to those sites and the ways group factors are used in the construction process.

Finally, Chapter 8 looks ahead, considering two apparently contradictory trends—mixing and multiplicity on one hand, separation and consolidation on the other—that give to ethnicity and race two very different faces as we enter the 21st century.

NOTE

1. Robert Park, although hardly a Marxist, shared the general view that economic relations were the ones that would endure. "Race conflicts in the modern world," he wrote, "will be more and more in the future confused with, and eventually superseded by, the conflicts of classes" (Park 1939:45).