

Faces of Ethnicity: An Interview With Nathan Glazer

ALEKSANDAR ŠTULHOFER

Department of Sociology
University of Zagreb
e-mail: astulhof@filozof.ffzg.hr

UDK:316-051(047.53)GLAZER
316.356.4(047.53)=20
Primljeno: 7. rujna 1994.

Nathan Glazer is Professor Emeritus of Education and Social Structure at Harvard University and co-editor of "The Public Interest". Born in New York, he got a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia University (1962), and started teaching at Berkeley in 1963, later to become affiliated with Harvard University. As he briefly stated, his lifelong interests "have been ethnic issues and social policy".

His Presidential appointments include the Task Force on Urban Affairs (1964 and 1972) and Education (1980). He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, serving as its Secretary from 1980 to 1982. Aside from the bestseller "The Lonely Crowd" (1950; co-authored with D.Riesman and R.Denney), among his books are "American Judaism" (1957), "The Social Basis of American Communism" (1961), "Cities in Trouble (1970; editor), "Beyond the Melting Pot" (1963; co-authored with D.P.Moynihan), "Cities in Trouble" (1970; editor), "Remembering the Answers: Essays on the American Student Revolt" (1970), "Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy" (1975), "Ethnicity: Theory and Experience" (1975; co-edited with D.P.Moynihan), "The Urban Predicament" (1976; co-edited with W.Gorham), "Ethnic Dilemmas: 1964-1982" (1983), "Ethnic Pluralism and Public Policy" (1983; co-edited with K.Young), "The Public Interest on Crime and Punishment" (1984; editor), "The Public Interest on Education" (1984; editor), "The Public Face of Architecture (1987; co-edited with M.Lilla), "The Limits of Social Policy" (1988), and "The New Immigration: A Challenge to American Society" (1988).

This interview took place in Salzburg, on July 7, where Professor Glazer was a Faculty member of Salzburg Seminar on "Religion, Ethnicity, and Self-Identity". The interviewer would like to thank Mrs Glazer for her kind assistance.

* * *

- After witnessing recent resurgence of ethnic conflicts and violence in the last two decades, how valid do you see the old "diffusion" (or "developmental") theory that claimed negative correlation between the level of modernization and the intensity of ethnic affiliation.

Nathan Glazer - Well, I think it's a perfectly sound theory. I mean sound in the sense of an interesting generalization. My view is that most generalizations in sociology, particularly those that take a correlative character, are at this stage of development of sociology, and maybe forever, too simple. I mean, if you break down the two categories that we're comparing: modernization and ethnic conflict, I think you can find cases where that works fine. For example, take Western Europe where there is no question that the intensity of ethnic conflict has been reduced, conflicts between Scandinavian societies, between Germany and France, France and England, etc. There might be many other factors that explain it, but I think one factor is a degree of economic development which normally means better economic conditions for most, but also means high level of education which tends - at least in the Western world - to break down prejudices and stereotypes. But there are always other factors involved, so it will not hold universally. I mean, would it be the case that the spread of modernization in Malaysia will reduce conflicts between the Malays, Chinese and Indians?

Possibly not because there might be other factors, the increasing strength of fundamentalism among Muslim groups, for example. You have to take into account other factors. I would say one important element in the decline of ethnic conflict in Western Europe is a rise of a kind of rational cynicism in which nothing is taken deadly seriously - whether it's patriotism or religion.

- But, I guess, you would not say that this sort of correlation can be found only in the Western world?

Nathan Glazer - No, it is certainly presented as the more general. I only suggest that there are different categories under modernization and different categories under ethnic conflict. For example, some years ago people used to talk about the rise of movements of provincial autonomy in Western Europe: Scotland, the Bretons, the Catalonians... They represent different kind of modernization, and we have different kind of ethnic conflict in result. It was more contained within the national state, more manageable, it simply involved a certain degree of political moderation to manage it; it gave autonomous rights like in the districts of Spain and it solved the problem all the way. But, then, look at the Basques. Why the Basques are sort of violent I do not know. The generalization is a good one, but one has to break down both elements (i.e. modernization and ethnicity) as being too overbroad to really hold up.

- In the late 19th. and early 20th. century, modernism implied a uniform, one-dimensional ("progressive") national identity which is now, if we replace "progressive" with "traditional", and "national" with "religious", the pattern of fundamentalism. Can it be said that the process of postmodernization is creating a different type of identity: a multifaceted and multidimensional one? If so, are those "multiple identities" (and the "explosion of identities", to use your term) - as in the case of an African-American-feminist-homosexual-urban professional - actually preventing ethnic friction by enabling us to deal more flexibly (shifting from one identity to the other) with the everyday reality. Or are they rather dangerous in the sense that they pose a threat to social cohesion and the common fabric of society that represents the basis of social solidarity?

Nathan Glazer - I mentioned in the response to the earlier question the rise of a kind of rational cynicism about one's nation. Now, I think when you look at national cohesion a great deal depends - in terms of fears about national cohesion (fears about disloyalty) - on the degree to which there is a total commitment to the nation. In the 1950s, with the cold war against communism, senator McCarthy accused many Americans of treason and there was a tremendous amount of conflict in the society. It was not ethnic conflict, it was really the question of political loyalties but many feared certain groups would be more affected than others. Now, attitudes in the United States or France, or England are different. You take the case of England, the attitude towards the great expedition, which was very expensive, to the Falklands. On the whole the British supported it, and a sense of patriotism was still involved. But you also have people who said "look at the costs, it wasn't worth saving these 1200 sheep farms". So I do think there is a decline in monolithism that means we can accommodate - with less danger, I think - the explosions of identities. We are not so fast any more to attribute treason as we were in 50s. I do think you're right: many of these identities are crosscutting and that helps. There are black lesbians and whether they are more concerned about lesbian/gay rights or black rights might vary from situation to situation. It is true that there are people who have written novels about wars between men and women or the rise of the Amazons, but women are so related to men that they can never quite exercise the separatist role that ethnic group can.

In the context of cross-cutting identities, I was thinking of the discussion concerning the Balkans this morning. There is no question that one of the problems of the Balkans, and I was going to raise the question about some other countries, is the way religion and nation coincide. You take the border between Poland and Ukraine, with Catholics on the

one side and Eastern Orthodox on the other, or the situations with eastern Hungarians and Rumanians - Rumanians who are Eastern Orthodox versus Hungarian who are Calvinists. In the case of Bosnia more and more have religion and ethnicity become a dangerous mix. Now, when I think of provincial upsurges in Europe there is always something which restrains it. The Bretons are Catholic too, or the Scots also speak English - so you have those strong coinciding lines of language, culture, religion. If you think about the situation becoming more moderate in Western Europe, you might well say that this is a factor as well as the increased wealth. So I think you're right, I think that the explosion of identities also cuts down certain identities. One of the Salzburg Fellows was saying in this seminar: "sometimes my identity changes depending on the situation". When he is abroad he is very American, when he is with a group of Americans he is very Japanese American, when he is in a group of writers he is a writer... So, identity is selected according to the social situation: the American, the Japanese, the writer or the male. Though I think there are certain identities that are more basic. There is a definition by C. Geertz or R. Emerson of ethnicity as the identity which, when the chips are down, is the most basic. Well, I do not know if when the chips are down blackness, let's say, is the most basic. Probably it is more basic than American, but for a lot of other groups I don't think the ethnic identity would become the most basic.

- *What is your opinion of the Rational Choice approach to ethnicity claiming that ethnicity is either a "corporate" possibility for the individuals to maximise benefits which can not be maximized via individual action, or simply a sociocultural constraint on the individual rationality that makes collective action less vulnerable to free riding.*

Nathan Glazer - That is a good question. Choice is important, especially the choice of ethnicity. There was a reference, I think maybe on this morning's lecture, to the people in Poland who claim German origin. Now, that's a very rational choice. Nobody spoke German but they knew life was better in Germany - even if you're on unemployment insurance - in Germany you would be better off than in Poland. So everyone is surprised how many "Germans" there are in Poland. Now, that's at one crude basis, one crude example of a purely or a mostly rational choice. I have, oddly enough, someone related to me who is half Jewish and half American Indian. He knew he was American Indian, but he ignored his real father. But over time he began to identify himself: he was an artist, more and more an American Indian artist. He began to take up themes from the American Indian nativist tradition. He is now one of the leading American Indian artists of the United States. He is 50% Mohawk, and he is a member of tribe. So I have seen a shift from rational choice to a kind of more basic commitment. You can go from rational choice to basic commitment in sense of the choice - whatever reason you undertake it engages you, or involves you, or connects you and becomes your life. Certainly, rational choice plays a role.

In the United States there are many examples of people who have two second names. There is a case of a well known married Hispanic woman. She uses her family name exclusively because there is a degree of affirmative action for Hispanics. Or take the case of African Americans. They have no choice because the American pattern of race consciousness makes every partial black a whole black. In Jewish gentile marriages there are choices that mean very different things. In these days they are not so much rational choices but rather sentimental choices because there is very little loss, if any, in being Jewish in today's America. One time those choices were much more rational.

When we talk of African Americans we talk of a group that has no choice. It does have the choice of passing if the complexion is fair enough, and just not black anymore. In other cases there are choices, because of the great amount of intermarriage, so you can choose your identity. While choosing you certainly have rational factors influencing you in different ways. Still, I think one should not overly emphasize the rational factor. There is such a thing as a primordial movement. Let me give you an example. There is a big movement in the

United States, and maybe in other places, for adopted children to find their parents. People write books about it, they set up movements, there is a lot of discussion going on: is it good to do it?, is it bad to do it?, and so on. Well, I do not think it is a rational choice. I do not think they think: "If I find my birth parents I'll be richer". It is quite the other way around; the birth parent is generally of a lower social status than the parent who adopted. This is more of a kind of intimate priority - to be able to answer "Who am I?", with this notion that genetic inheritance tells you something about yourself, something you want to know. In conclusion, I think the rational choice elements are strong - we see them operating, we see them operating crudely, we see them operating in a more sophisticated way - but the primordial element one should not ignore.

- In recent lectures you argued that there is a specific ethnic pattern in the US. Aside from the almost religious (in Durkheimian sense) power of the Constitution you have mentioned, do you see other "safety mechanisms" incorporated in the pattern? Will they be capable of preventing ethnic frictions? Having in mind current demographic trends in the US which will make minorities the majority, this seems to be of great importance.

Nathan Glazer - Well, I think there are other safety factors. One of them that might be related to the Constitution is the significance of legal mechanisms and the respect given to them by saying: "Resort to the law!". I will give you an example, which I must say, impresses me. I have been studying the case of two professors at City College, New York (the college I went to) both of whom have become terribly controversial, all on this multicultural sort of side. One of them is Jewish, and he argued the intellectual inferiority of Blacks. OK, that is a very dangerous thing to argue, but he has written articles, has a whole book - but not a publisher yet (and I do not think anybody wants to publish it). He had a lot of troubles at City College. His classes have been disrupted, he was denounced at the State by the Faculty Council, and a committee has been formed to investigate his "inadequate" teaching. Since he was giving an introductory course in Philosophy, the administration set up another course for the students who did not want to take his course. He sued in Federal Court, on the grounds of the 1st Amendment, that he was being punished because of his free speech. So there was a trial in New York, and the decision said: "His rights of free speech were abridged, you cannot investigate what he does, you cannot set up another classroom, and you must try your hardest to prevent his classes of being disrupted." So, there he is teaching away, and it seems that the trial (the decision is now three years old) has settled the whole thing. Now, why has this decision settled it? One can be just as angry at him now as then. One can say: "This College is 35% Black, and he is saying we are inferior. We are not going to give up, we are going to throw rocks at him, we are going drive him out of campus."

What I am saying is that the acceptance of law is a powerful phenomenon. And this is not an institutionalized factor, it is just something that has grown up over the years - with many conflicts where laws were not observed. Take the "Scott decision" saying that all the arrangements Congress made on slavery were relevant because you could not limit slavery to one part of United States. That is why Lincoln was elected, and that is why the South seceded: and then you had a war, more or less. What I am saying is that this is a very strong mechanism, a legal mechanism, in which we go to the law for almost anything, and that is a real restraint.

Then, I think, there is another point we have not talked about much, either in the sessions or working groups. I believe there is such a thing as political intelligence. I would not call it a wisdom, maybe a kind of cunning, if you will, or a kind of common sense that says: "If we do that it is going to be terrible, and if we do not do that it will be better." Now, I am not saying that the United States have always exhibited it, but because it is a mixed country, because it begins with one kind of diversity - a religious one (we have, for example, no state churches) - the state and church will not mix. There is a lot of prejudice, but there

are moments of political intelligence in decision-making - such as that the percentage of Black representatives should equal the percentage of Blacks in the nation. And the kind of arrangements that say: "We can not exclude other Americans just because they look different" - are more or less accepted.

Many Americans are absolutists in various ways, but the elite level tends to be (though not always) withdrawn from absolutism. I can think of few cases of unnecessary absolutism over the years. In many ways the Cold War was absolutized - at enormous cost - and it caused a lot of trouble. I am saying this on the basis of reading some histories which suggest that even Reagan, in the early days of his administration, was involved in correspondence with Russian leaders. He said: "If I talk to them we can all make a deal." The Soviet Union was already in trouble so they could have made the deal, but his advisers, his intelligent, sophisticated advisers said: "No, you can not give in an inch!", and they would prevent him from writing letters.

So, I think, there is an overall tendency to avoid absolutism. Not throughout the society, but certainly on the elite level. This is a kind of safeguard. One of the problems with that is: will we have that kind of political intelligence among minorities when they become majorities? Some of it we can already see at work in some of the cities, where we have Black majority and Black Mayors. On the whole, the role of the Black majors is quite good. First of all, there is almost nowhere where they are not dependent on White votes. Secondly, they are also dependent on White-run States, because States provide money. So, on the whole, I do not see this absolutization occurring anywhere, and that is - you might say - a kind of the pattern of long time democracy, deals, and arguments. Anyhow, I am the optimist on that score... maybe I should not be.

- You wrote a well known book on affirmative action. If one just glances at its cover page, your title ("Affirmative Discrimination") clearly suggest your disenchantment with the policy. You write that your own position in viewing affirmative action is a pragmatic one. You are very much against the eradication of the policy, but at the same time you are advocating some substantial changes. How would those changes, if made, reflect on the problem of multiculturalism which largely draws its self-consciousness from the affirmative action implementation?

Nathan Glazer - That is a complicated story. Obviously, I was against affirmative action in employment and college education and so on, and I argued that we have to operate on individual basis; to get rights on the basis of group affiliation is a very bad thing for America. Nevertheless it was done. At the time I argued against it: one never knew what the end of policy would be, how far would it go. There is the Lebanese example - the whole country gets cut up. For various principled reasons it got to be a very messy program, and it operates administratively because Congress just does not want to touch it. Again, that is the avoidness of absolutism. The debates would go on forever so they prefer not to talk about it: "Let the executives run it, and the Courts interpret it, but the Congress stays out."

It is not the worst system, but it contains a lot of nonsense, crazy things like when Asian American immigrants get preference in bidding for government contracts over native Americans just because they are Chinese or Japanese or Asian Indian and the other person is just a white American. Anyway, by now the policy is so institutionalized, every business has a affirmative action office, every College or University has an affirmative action officer, that if you knocked it out (and you could in theory) you would throw thousands of affirmative action officers out of work. And they are all Black so you should not do it. So it is an accommodation.

In principle I would like to see an end point, an indication of where is this supposed to end and an indication of who is out and who is in. But I think we are going to have to depend on Courts to interpret it. And I think they will. When it comes to Asian Americans they might say: "These laws are no longer necessary." If you take admissions to Colleges,

the Colleges definitely changed the policy by 1983 so there was drop off in Asian Americans' admission. Then the Asian Americans howled, and they now get admitted not on any affirmative action grounds but on quality grounds.

Finally, I am pragmatic in this sense. For 12 years we had a Republican administration. We had 8 years of Reagan and 4 years of Bush. They specifically ran for Office saying they were against affirmative action and that they would change it. They did not change it for a jot. They tried it but there was such a storm that they gave up. If a committed ideologue like Reagan could not change it, no one can change it. Drop it, leave it to history and see what happens.

- In 1975, your book *"Ethnicity: Theory and Experience"* presented what was then the state of art in ethnic studies. Since that time we have been witnessing a steady growth of scholarly interest in the matters of ethnicity. In your opinion, what kind of future research agenda do we need? Should we concentrate on the more elaborate descriptions of local ethnic situations throughout the world, or on the more general, theoretical modeling?

Nathan Glazer - First of all, on the empirical side, you do not even have to give anyone any orders. Just listening to my working group I was amazed with all these problems people study. Then, they have to study them because they are usually their own problems, and they bother their own people. So they just go on studying them and there is no way of avoiding it. On the theory side, I think we have to build up little elements of theory. I suppose it goes back to Robert K. Merton's middle range theories. For example, I think that the most impressive book - though I have not read all the books on ethnicity, there are so many of them - or one of the most impressing books trying to develop a theory or a partial theory is Donald Horowitz's *"Ethnic groups in conflict"* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985). He does not take all ethnic conflicts, he takes developing world conflicts, and he studies them in some detail and comes up with some interesting things. I mean, I find them interesting. The key issue for him is when you are a minority and you know the polity is ethnicized, what reassures you that you are not going to loose everything?" Or what can reassure you that you will not loose everything? Well, that is the situation in so many other parts of the world.

I think we need building blocks of theory, and in that respect we were probably premature in the *"Theory and Experience"*. We divided the empirical cases into three groups. We dealt with the Western world, we dealt with the developing world, and we dealt with what we called "the old Empires" (including Soviet Union, India and China), but we did not really write an introduction to say that there is one governing principle for each of these categories. Maybe we need more categories today, particularly in regards to Eastern Europe. We need another category to accommodate a different kind of history: the history of old nations, but nations which did not go through quite such a long period of establishing their reigns. So I think we have to develop partial theories. I opt for theorizing, but I think theories can not be universal.