The
ethnic
miracle

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The neighborhood is a 10-square-block area with almost 14,000 people, an average of 39.8 inhabitants per acre—three times that of the most crowded portions of Tokyo, Calcutta, and many other Asian cities. One block contains 1,349 children. A third of the neighborhood’s 771 buildings are built on “back lots” behind existing structures; the buildings are divided into 2,796 apartments, with a ratio of 3.7 rooms per apartment. More than three quarters of the apartments have less than 400 square feet. Tenants of the 556 basement apartments stand knee-deep in human excrement when even moderate rainstorms cause plumbing breakdowns. Garbage disposal is a chronic problem—usually, trash is simply dumped in the narrow passageways between buildings. Nine thousand of the neighborhood’s inhabitants use outdoor plumbing. The death rate is 37.2 per thousand per year.

These are the poorest of the poor people, making less than three quarters of the income of nonminority-group members in the same jobs. The rates of desertion, juvenile delinquency, mental disorder, and prostitution are the highest in the city here. Social disorganization in this neighborhood, according to all outside observers—even the sympathetic ones—is practically total and irredeemable.

The neighborhood is still there. You drive in from O'Hare airport and see the towering spires of St. Mary of the Angels, St. Stanislaus Kostka, and Holy Trinity. If you turn off at Division Street you will see that the manure boxes are gone, and so are the backyard buildings, the outdoor plumbing, the sweatshops over the barns, the tuberculosis, the family disorganization, the violence, and the excessive death rates.

For the most part, the Poles are gone too. Some of them remain, sharing a much more pleasant (and brightly painted) neighborhood with Puerto Ricans. Where have the Poles gone? Farther northwest along Milwaukee Avenue, even out into the suburbs—they are now a prosperous middle class. How have they managed to make it, this most despised of all the white immigrant groups? It is no exaggeration to say that no one really knows, and that the success of the southern and eastern European immigrant groups who frantically crowded into the United States before the First World War is as unexplained as it is astonishing. Indeed, rather than to attempt an explanation, many Americans—including some from those very same ethnic groups—prefer to deny the phenomenon of ethnic success.

Yet the “ethnic miracle” is one of the most fascinating stories in the history of the United States, an American success story, an accomplishment of the “system” in spite of itself; and while the “ethnic miracle” does not necessarily provide a model for later groups (in fact, it almost certainly does not), it does offer insights into how American society works that social-policy-makers can ill afford to ignore.

“Social disorganization”?

The neighborhood I described is called the “Stanislowowo” after St. Stanislaus Kotska, its parish church. At one time, it was the largest Catholic parish in the world (40,000 members) in the second largest Polish city in the world. Nobody in the United States between 1900 and 1920 did its parishioners any favors. In five of the years before the First World War, more than one million foreign immigrants poured into the country. They were ignorant, illiterate, and dirty; they spoke little English if any at all; their families, the sociologists of the time assured us, were chronically “disorganized.” They had no tradition of freedom and responsibili-
ty; they lacked political maturity. They were a bad bet to assimilate into American society.

Was there poverty and suffering in the Stanislowowo and neighborhoods like it? That was largely the fault of the immigrants themselves, Americans were told by their elites. The Dillingham Commission on immigration assured the rest of the country that the Italians were inherently disposed to criminal behavior and that the Polish family lacked stability—both groups were racially inferior. The walls of restrictive immigration legislation were quickly erected after the war to end immigration. Large-scale "Americanization" campaigns were begun to try to teach these illiterate peasants the virtues of good Americans, and there was great hope that the public high schools would mold the children of the immigrants (the parents were beyond hope) into good, loyal, dutiful citizens.

There were no quotas, no affirmative action, no elaborate system of social services, and, heaven knows, no ethnic militancy (although it need not follow that there should not be these things for the more recent immigrants to the big cities of the United States). There was no talk of reparation, no sense of guilt, no feelings of compassion for these immigrants. The stupid, brutal, but pathetic heroes of Nelson Algren's novels were about as much as most Americans recognized; "Scarface" and "Little Caesar" of the motion pictures were taken to be typical of the Italians who got beyond street cleaning, ditch digging, garbage collection, and waiting on tables. It is safe to say that in the 20th century, no urban immigrants have been so systematically hated and despised by the nation's cultural and intellectual elites. The stereotypes may be more sophisticated now, but they still portray the ethnics as hateful and despicable. Stanley Kowalski has been replaced by Don Corleone, but both still represent the white ethnic as a blue-collar, racist, hard-hat, chauvinistic "hawk"—even though available statistical evidence does not support the myth of the Godfather or the bigot, and lends no credence to the ethnic joke.

Closely related to the thesis of the racial inferiority of the eastern and southern European immigrants was the theory of their cultural inferiority. "Social disorganization" was the explanation of the plight of the Stanislowowians offered by the "Chicago school" of sociology. The cultural values of the immigrants were not able to absorb the shock of the immigration experience and the resultant confrontation with the more "modern" values of the host society. Crime, generational conflict, family disorganization, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency were the effects of this unequal meeting
of a peasant and a modern culture. Several generations of scholars, administrators, and social workers were raised on such scholarly books as *The Gang*, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, and *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*—which were in whole or in part about the Stanislowowo; much of the reform legislation of the 1930's was designed from that perspective. The problem with the poor was not their poverty but their “social disorganization” and “alienation.” Fortunately for the ethnics, they stopped being poor before the reformers could set up high-rise public housing and dependency-producing welfare legislation to “undisorganize” them.

Across the Chicago River from “St. Stan’s” is the infamous Cabrini-Green high-rise public housing project, one of the most evil things that good intentions have ever produced—a monstrosity that causes the very “social disorganization” it was designed to eliminate. It is a slum far worse than the author of *The Gold Coast and the Slum* could have imagined, and while the death rate may not be as high as it was in the Stanislowowo in 1901, the human demoralization in Cabrini-Green is far worse. (*Cooley High* of movie fame was once the parochial high school for St. Stan’s.) If contemporary welfare, urban renewal, and public housing legislation had existed a half century ago, the Poles might still be poor, and sociologists might still be writing books about how the Polish family structure—one of the strongest in America—is “disorganized.”

One need not conclude that there ought to be no government intervention to help and protect the poor. On the contrary, the “ethnic miracle” might have happened more quickly if the government had intervened to prevent discrimination and to facilitate the rise out of poverty. But the “ethnic miracle” at least raises questions as to whether social legislation would be more effective if it were to respect the culture and family life of the poor and fight poverty directly, rather than with mostly useless attempts to correct “alienation” and “social disorganization.” There obviously are individuals and families so badly traumatized by either poverty or misguided efforts to “un-alienate” them (or combinations of both) that they cannot cope with problems or urban living without help from society. But the “ethnic miracle” suggests that such help should be aimed at making them think and act not like psychiatrically oriented social workers but rather like the more successful members of their own cultural community.

A half century ago, the “disorganization” models of the “Chicago school” of sociology looked like a big change from the biological racism of the Immigration Commission. In retrospect, and in light
of the "ethnic miracle," one is permitted to wonder if in fact the theory of "social disorganization" was not a more subtle but equally pernicious form of "cultural racism"—and one not absent by any means from the reform legislation of the 1960's.

**Explanations for success**

The 1920's and 1930's were bad times for the immigrants and their children. The fierce nativism of the 1920's and the grim and frustrating Great Depression of the 1930's kept them pretty much in the poverty of the immigrant neighborhoods. Only a few managed to claw their way out into middle-class respectability. But in the three decades since the end of the Second World War, an extraordinary economic and social phenomenon has occurred: The ethnics have made it. The Italians are now the third richest religio-ethnic group in American society—second only to Jews and Irish Catholics—and the Poles earn almost $1,000 a year more than the average white American in metropolitan areas of the North. In the middle 1940's, the curve of college attendance for young people for both Italians and Poles began to swing upward, so that by the 1960's, Poles and Italians of college age were more likely to attend college than the national average for white Americans.

Without anyone's noticing it, those who were doomed to be failures by their race, religion, language, and family backgrounds have now succeeded. Few of them are wealthy, some are still poor; but on the average their incomes are substantially higher than those of other white Americans living in the same cities and regions of the United States. Many Americans reject in principle the possibility of such a miracle; some of the ethnic leaders themselves (in a perhaps unintentional ethnic joke) vigorously deny the success of their own people; yet the data are beyond any reasonable doubt. In a very short space of time, the length of one generation, more or less, the American dream has come true; and some of the people who were children in the Stanislowowo in 1920 have lived to see and to enjoy the achievement of their dream. Even the Stanislowowo has changed for those who remain. The well fed, neatly dressed, scrupulously clean children who troop out of St. Stanislaus Kostka on a spring afternoon—grandchildren, perhaps, of the women who worked 60 hours a week in sweatshops filled with the stench of manure—are clearly the offspring of an affluent society.

There is doubtless much wrong with the United States of America, and we will doubtless hear all about it in the course of the 200th
anniversary of the republic; but sometimes things have gone well—despite almost conscious efforts to make them go badly. The success of the eastern and southern European immigrant groups of the turn of the century is one of America's success stories. The achievements of the Jews have been well known for some time; only recently have we discovered that the Italians and the Poles have also done remarkably well. We do not like to admit it. Very few agencies or scholars, whose responsibility it is to study and understand American society, show any interest at all in the extraordinary success story of those against whom the immigration acts of 1920 were directed. It seems that we couldn't care less about finding an explanation.

Perhaps it was the public school—maybe good, solid American education undid the work of a thousand years of oppression and misery. The evidence, however, suggests the opposite. The success of the Polish and the Italians seems to have come first in income, then in education, and finally in occupation (and, as we shall see later, they are still impeded somewhat in occupational achievement).1

The few scholars who pay any attention to immigration have begun to wonder whether the conventionally understood progression from education through occupation toward economic success is all that helpful a model. Among the Asian immigrants to the United States, and among the Sephardic Jews in Israel, income parity seems to come before educational and occupational parity. In the Sephardic families, for example, with everyone working—husband, wife, and children—equality of family income with the Ashkenazics has already been achieved, although educational and occupational parity lag behind. It would seem very likely that most immigrant groups must first achieve some kind of basic financial success, and only then

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1 The empirical evidence on which this article is based comes from an analysis of a composite file assembled from 12 National Opinion Research Center (NORC) national sample surveys (A complete report will be published under the title Ethnicity, Denomination, and Inequality by Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, California.) The composite sample numbers some 18,000 respondents and, despite serious limitations, still represents the best collection of data currently available on American religio-ethnic groups. The United States Census cannot ask a religious question, and only recently has the Census' monthly "Current Population Survey" (CPS) begun to ask an ethnic question intermittently. However, since Polish Jews and Polish Catholics are combined under the rubric "Pole," and Irish Protestants (disproportionately rural southerners and more numerous than Catholics) are combined with Irish Catholics, the CPS data are useful only with respect to Italians. The NORC composite statistics, however, have been compared with the results of the CPS (50,000 respondents). There are only slight variations between the two; in the case of the Italians, a group for which the NORC data and CPS data are roughly comparable, there is virtually no difference in the statistics on education, occupation, and income. Unfortunately, until funding agencies are willing to support better data collection, composite survey data will provide the only available evidence for scholarly investigation.
can they exploit the advantages of educational and occupational mobility and concomitant opportunities for even more dramatic income achievement.

However patriarchal the family structures may have been, the women of the ethnic immigrants went to work from the beginning—long before it became an upper-middle-class fashion. The income of many wage earners in a family no doubt provided an economic base for the ethnics to make their initial breakthrough—which occurred, perhaps, sometime in the early 1950’s. (Data on neighborhood concentration of various ethnic communities indicate that the Poles finally began to move out from the center of the city at that time.) But by 1970, the women in Polish and Italian families were no more likely to have jobs than their nonethnic counterparts in the large cities of the North. So the income achievement of the southern and eastern European Catholics cannot be explained by multiple wage earners in the family—though there is a possibility that many of the men and some of the women may also have second and third jobs.\(^2\)

### Education and income mobility

The mean education of Polish, Italian, and Slavic Catholics ("Slavic" means non-Polish eastern Europeans) is substantially be-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELIGIO-ETHNIC GROUP</th>
<th>YEARS OF EDUCATION</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Catholic</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Protestant</td>
<td>12.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Catholic</td>
<td>11.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National white average</td>
<td>11.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>German Protestant</td>
<td>11.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian Protestant</td>
<td>11.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish Catholic</td>
<td>11.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italian Catholic</td>
<td>11.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Protestant</td>
<td>10.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;American&quot; Protestant</td>
<td>10.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slavic Catholic</td>
<td>10.84</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Source: National Opinion Research Center.

\(^2\) Nor do the 25 years of prosperity between 1945 and 1970 explain the "ethnic miracle," though they obviously created an environment in which such a miracle could occur. For not only did the ethnics improve their income during that quarter century, as did virtually everyone else, but they improved it disproportionately. At the end of the quarter century, not only were they better off than in 1945, they had improved their relative position in comparison with the rest of the population. Prosperity, in other words, provided the opportunity for the "ethnic miracle," but the miracle itself was a response to the opportunity.
low the national white average of 11.56 years. The Poles and the Italians have little more than 11 years of education, the Slavs fall under 11 years (Table I on the previous page). However, when one looks at educational achievement given parental educational level, the Catholic ethnics have higher academic achievement than do British Americans; indeed it is higher than anyone else in the country save for the Jews—and the Italians have an even higher achievement than Jews.

Furthermore, if one considers college attendance by the various age cohorts (an indication of educational decisions made by an ethnic collectivity at a time when a given cohort was of college age), one can see that the slope of college attendance for the three southern and eastern European ethnic groups turned sharply upward in the 1940's; by the 1960's, it had crossed the national average.3

While Irish Catholics are not significantly different from British Protestants in occupational achievement, the three more recent Catholic ethnic groups were substantially beneath the national average in occupation and did not make up the difference even when parental education and their own education was taken into account. In other words, the Polish, Slavic, and Italian Catholics were not getting the occupational prestige to which their education seemed to entitle them in comparison with British Protestants.

However, despite their lower occupational achievement, the Catholic ethnic groups (save for the Slavs) earn more money than their British counterparts, and when the pertinent background variables are taken into account these differences become statistically significant. Indeed, the net advantage of Italians over British Protestants in income is higher even than that of the Jews. In other words, while they may not get the kind of jobs their education entitles them to, the Catholic ethnics seem to make more money than their occupa-

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3 The analytic technique used is a form of dummy-variable multiple-regression analysis in which each ethnic group becomes a dummy variable and is compared with the British Protestant group. The “net differences” among groups are arrived at by adding to the regression equation the dummy variables for region and for metropolitan residence, as well as for the number of years of the mothers’ and fathers’ education. Subsequent net differences are arrived at by adding individual educational achievement and occupational prestige to the regression equation. This method is somewhat different from that used in Ethnicity, Denomination, and Equality and is more “conservative” statistically, permitting estimates of the statistical significance of observed differences. I am grateful to Christopher Jencks for suggesting the technique to me. College attendance was measured according to the log of the “odds ratio” of attendance to non-attendance for each age cohort. Tests of statistical significance were used to determine that the slope of the three ethnic groups was different from the national slope.
Table II. Real Family Income and Religio-Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religio-Ethnic Group</th>
<th>1974 Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>$14,577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Catholic</td>
<td>13,451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Catholic</td>
<td>12,543</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italian Catholic</td>
<td>12,473</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polish Catholic</td>
<td>12,257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Protestant</td>
<td>12,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National average for whites</td>
<td>11,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Protestant</td>
<td>11,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slavic Catholic</td>
<td>11,499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian Protestant</td>
<td>11,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Protestant</td>
<td>10,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;American&quot; Protestant</td>
<td>10,572</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Opinion Research Center.

In sum, eastern and southern European Catholics do more with their parents' education in terms of their own education than do other Americans, and they also do more with their occupation in terms of income earned than do other Americans. However, they apparently still are not able to convert education into the same level of occupational prestige as that of Jews and British Protestants.

A word should be said in passing about a slightly earlier "ethnic miracle," that of the Irish Catholics, who are the richest, best educated, and most prestigious occupationally of any gentile religio-ethnic group—the comparison again being made with their appropriate counterparts, those living in metropolitan regions in the North. Irish-Catholic college attendance for those of college age surpassed the national average as long ago as 1910, and has remained substantially above the average ever since, passing even the Episcopalians in the 1960's. The Irish Catholic income advantage over British Protestants is $1,243 a year (trailing behind the $2,369-a-year advantage of Jews). Many of those who are willing to admit that the Poles and the Italians may have achieved rough parity with the rest of the country find the spectacular success of Irish Catholics almost impossible to swallow.

There may be an important social policy hint in the apparent
primacy of income in the "assimilation" of the early 20th-century immigrants. Subject to much more careful investigation, one might take it as a tentative hypothesis that the school is a rather poor institution for facilitating the upward mobility of minority groups—until they first acquire some kind of rough income parity. The naive American faith that equality of education produces equality of income seems to have been stood on its head in the case of the ethnics. For them, better income meant more effective education.\(^5\)

Nor did the public schools play the critical "Americanization" role that such educators as Dr. James B. Conant expected them to play in the 1940's and 1950's. Even taking into account parents' education and income, the most successful of the ethnics—educationally, occupationally, and economically—went to parochial schools, and they did so at a time when the schools were even more overcrowded than they are today, staffed by even less adequately trained teachers, and administered by an even smaller educational bureaucracy than the very small one that somehow manages to keep the parochial schools going today. Again, a social policy hint: Maybe what matters about schools for a minority group is, as my colleague Professor William McCready has remarked, that "they are our schools" (whoever "we" may be).

The legacy of the immigrants

So one must still face the puzzle: Despite the virtually unanimous opinion of educated Americans a half century ago, the children and

\(^5\) It should be noted that I do not intend to suggest a comparison between the white immigrants of the turn of the century and the more recent nonwhite immigrants to the city. The path of upward mobility which worked for one group at one time does not necessarily work for another group at another time. Comparisons may be interesting and suggestive, but they should not be pushed too far. The Polish immigrants were indeed abject and miserable, unwanted and humiliated—but they were still white. On the other hand, the apparent historical phenomenon of income preceding rather than following education for the ethnics does seem to add weight to the argument of those who presently wonder whether too much has been expected of education as a corrective of social pathology in the last two decades. The experience of the ethnics is interesting in itself; whatever hints for current social policy may be obtained from their study should be considered no more than that—certainly not as blueprints for imitation. Occasionally one hears an ethnic complain "Why can't 'they' work hard like we did?" but the evidence shows that most ethnics are well aware that nonwhites have to put up with greater obstacles. The irony of their comment is aimed not so much at the more recent immigrants but rather at those of the intellectual and cultural elite who despised the ethnics when they were poor, and have contempt for them now that they are middle-class. As the Irishman said, "Where were you when we needed help?"
the grandchildren of eastern and southern European immigrants have achieved not only economic equality but economic superiority, on the average, in the United States. They were not supposed to be able to do it; to many people it is incredible that they have done it; and to almost everyone the explanation of their success is obscure. Now we see that the ethnics in the quarter century between the end of the Second World War and the end of the Vietnamese War did exactly what the Jews had done in the previous quarter century—and with apparent ease.

How did they manage it? The immigrants themselves were ambitious. Perhaps they were the enterprising and courageous young people in their own societies—and young they were. When we see movies like *Hester Street*, many of us are astonished to discover that the immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were disproportionately young, and either unmarried or just recently married. We all have a recollection of an old grandparent whom we knew during childhood, and without giving the matter much thought, we tend to imagine the immigrants themselves as old—forgetting that the old *babushka* or *mamacita* was once as young as we were.

The immigrants came from a Europe which, as one American historian has remarked, "invited desertion." The population expansion of the middle 19th century had created a land-hungry peasant class for whom there was no room either on the farms or in the cities. They came to the United States seeking the "good life," the kind of life that owning land made possible. They were fully prepared to work hard; indeed, a life of anything but hard work was beyond their comprehension. They would work hard to make money. "All the Italians want is money," remarked an observer around 1910, and like devout practitioners of the Protestant ethic, they would sacrifice to save as much money as they could. In 1905, when Poles were still pouring into the city of Chicago, 15 per cent of the money in Chicago savings-and-loan institutions was already in Polish-owned associations, a remarkable achievement for people who were scarcely off the boat. Credit buying was taboo; "cash money" paid for everything. Desperately poor people themselves, with scores of generations of poverty behind them, the immigrants could imagine no other way to live besides scrimping, sacrificing, saving. America did them no favors, gave them no special treatment, in fact discriminated against them, forced them into the most menial occupations and the most miserable housing, and exploited them through the most corrupt political structures in the country. Americans hated them, despised them, condemned them, and eventually tried to bar
their relatives from joining them; they joked about them, stereotyped them, and tried to change them into "good Americans" by making them ashamed of their own heritages.

The Poles and the Italians, like the Irish and the Jews before them, bitterly resented such treatment, but they did not grow angry at the United States, for even though it did them no favors, it still provided them with two things they would never have had in the old country: personal freedom and the opportunity to convert the hard work they took for granted into economic progress. In the old country, hard work got you nothing; in the United States it got you, or at least your children or their children, a chance.

Hard work, saving, sacrifice—such is a tentative explanation of the "ethnic miracle." Ironically, the Catholic ethnics turned out to be very good at these "Protestant" and "American" traits that the Dillingham Commission thought they could never learn. To work hard, to save, to be ambitious for oneself and one's children—the immigrants needed no "Americanization" to learn that way of life. They came here with a dream; it was not that they expected something for nothing, but rather that their hard work would earn them something. For some of them, for many of their children, and for most of their grandchildren the dream came true.

Is that how it happened? It would seem so, though until much more careful study of the history of immigrant families is done, we will not know for sure. And it should be done in the relatively near future, while some of the immigrants and their oldest children are still alive to be interviewed. But curiously enough, many Americans, including ethnics like Michael Novak, are much more eager to believe that the American dream has not come true for the ethnics. If it hasn't, then there is nothing to explain.

In the process of economic achievement, have the ethnics "assimilated"? Have they absorbed the values and beliefs and behavior patterns of the host culture? To begin with, they came with many values in common. They were, after all, products of the same white-European, Judaeo-Christian heritage. They learned to speak English quickly, they wore the same clothes, listened to the same radio and television programs, read the same newspapers; and yet a remarkable diversity of values, attitudes, styles, opinions, and behavior has persisted. Affection and authority, for example, are recognizably different in Jewish, Italian, Polish, and Irish families, as are the styles with which they approach politics, the ways in which they consume alcohol, and the ultimate views they hold about human nature and the nature of the universe.
Ethnicity and American culture

Furthermore, these differences do not seem to diminish with the number of generations ethnics have been in the United States or with the amount of education they have had. In a loose, pluralistic society like the United States, economic success and rather harmonious adjustment to other groups can be achieved while still maintaining a partially distinctive culture. Indeed, such a distinctive culture can be maintained without having to be self-conscious about it. The Irish propensity for politics and alcohol, for example, and the Polish propensity to vote (Poles have the highest voting rates of any American religio-ethnic group) are not affected by ethnic self-consciousness or militancy. The anxiety of the Dillingham Commission and its nativist successors about whether diversity threatened America's "common culture" missed the whole point: In America the common culture validates diversity in theory, if not in practice. You can be anything you want—religiously, culturally, stylistically—so long as you are committed to the fundamental political principles of the republic.

Ethnicity is not a way of looking back to the old world. Most of the immigrants were only too happy to get the hell out of it. Ethnicity is rather a way of being American, a way of defining yourself into the pluralistic culture which existed before you arrived. The last thing in the world the new ethnic upper-middle class wants is to define themselves out of the common American culture. Why should they? America may have done them no favors, but it still has been better to them than any society their families ever knew.

So the militant ethnic somewhere out there in "middle America"—hard hat on his head and gun in his hand, ready to tear society apart by resisting the advances of the nonwhite immigrants—is almost entirely a fiction of the imagination of liberals and leftists in the media and the academy. The ethnic may not always like some of the things he sees and hears on television, but his standard of living has doubled at least in the last quarter century, so he is not angry at the "American way"; he is not about to do anything to endanger his still precarious respectability and affluence. He may rejoice that the black activism of the 1960's has legitimated his somewhat more explicit and conscious pride in heritage, but the "ethnic revival" or the "new ethnic militancy" is largely another fiction of the liberal imagination.

Nor has the ethnic turned to the right. He is neither a "rugged individualist" nor a political reactionary, as many left-liberal commentators would so dearly like to believe. On social legislation, the
Italian, Polish, and for that matter, Irish Catholics are still left of center, still members of the New Deal coalition. They did not disproportionately defect from the Democratic party to vote against George McGovern, nor were they strong supporters of George Wallace in the 1968 Presidential election. The myth of the massive Polish vote for Wallace is so powerful that it is practically impossible to debunk; yet the Poles were the most likely of all gentile groups to vote for Hubert Humphrey, and substantially less than the six per cent non-Southern vote for Wallace was recorded among Polish Catholics. It would surely be inaccurate to think of the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of the ethnics as left-wing liberals or militant integrationists (most militants seem to live in the suburbs), but on virtually every political and social issue facing the country today, the ethnics are either at the center or to the left of it. Their Irish coreligionists are either close to or just behind the Jews on most measures of liberalism. I do not expect such data to be believed, because too many people have too much emotional energy invested in the opposite opinion. The data, nevertheless, are impossible to ignore.

So the "ethnic miracle" was accomplished without the complete loss of values or family structures—and without a right-wing backlash either. Indeed it was accomplished without any notable desertion from the Democratic party. The Stanislowowians and their children and grandchildren apparently made it despite their Polish values and family structure.

But is the word "despite" appropriate? Might there be a possibility that there was something in the culture of the immigrants that actually facilitated the "ethnic miracle"? Preliminary but sophisticated research conducted both at the Department of Labor and the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) suggests that Catholics and Jews are more successful in American society than Protestants because of some special factor at work in their early childhood—perhaps a closer and more intense attention from parents. As Thomas Juster of the NBER observes, "Economists and other social scientists have recently begun to pay close attention to the possible role of preschool investments in children by parents as it affects subsequent educational attainment... [and to the] possible influence on earnings of different amounts of parental time spent with preschool or school-age children... Taking account of family background factors like father's and mother's education and occupation, variables for both Jewish and Catholic religious preference have a significant (positive) impact on reported earnings relative to
respondents' reporting of Protestant preference. . . . Plausible hypotheses are that they reflect differences in the cultural background to which the respondents were exposed during formative years or differences in the quality or quantity of parental time inputs . . . .”

Not only the Dillingham Commission but even the Protestant ethic has been stood on its head; the familial culture of the ethnics, their stubborn differences in family values, may well have turned out to be an economic asset. In the absence of further research, such a possibility will remain an intriguing speculation.6

**Status versus income**

Is all well then for the ethnics? Not quite. Their educational mobility is the highest in America, and their income achievement goes beyond what one would expect, given their education and occupation. However, they do not achieve the occupational status appropriate for their education.

Interestingly enough, this discrepancy occurs at the upper end of the educational and prestige hierarchies. Poles and Italians do as well in occupational prestige as anyone else if they do not go to college. However, among those who have attended college, Poles and Italians have notably lower occupational-prestige scores. For those who attended college, the “cost” of being Polish or Italian is about one-third as high as the cost of being black, and more than half that of being Spanish-speaking.

How can one explain this underrepresentation of the college-educated ethnics in the occupational-prestige levels to which their education should entitle them? In the past, many social scientists would have attributed the difference to a lack of energy, or ambition, or “need achievement” among the ethnics. However, the considerable economic achievement of the ethnics makes this explanation implausible. Others would suggest that the ethnics are more likely to devote psychic energy to income than to prestigious occupations—to become insurance brokers, for example, instead of college professors.

James Coleman and his colleagues asked the same question in their study of how blacks and whites maximize their resources in

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6 Let it be noted again that while ambition, hard work, and strong family support for achievement may have been the path to upward mobility for the white ethnics, it does not follow that the same path can or must be followed by more recent immigrants. The ethnic miracle is worth studying in itself even if it has no pertinence to more recent social problems or provides only useful insights for considering those problems.
obtaining jobs. Using a technique called "canonical correlations," they concluded that there is a tendency for blacks to seek income in jobs, and whites to seek status. It would appear that British Protestants, Irish Catholics, and Polish Catholics follow exactly the same pattern of "investing" their education into status and income as do Coleman's whites (indeed, to almost the same numerical weights). To paraphrase Coleman, the status attributes of jobs attract British, Irish, and Polish ethnics; the income attributes of jobs attract Italians and Jews. The occupational disadvantage of the Italians relative to their education may be a result of an "overinvestment" in income achievement, which parallels that of the Jews. (The Jews have higher occupational status than their education "entitles" them to, but they achieve even higher income than their occupation "entitles" them to.) However, no such strategy exists for the Poles and the Irish, and the substantial underrepresentation of college-educated Poles and the moderate underrepresentation of college-educated Irish Catholics in higher prestige positions cannot be explained by a differential strategy. Thus the question of discrimination must necessarily remain open, at least for these groups.

Whatever the explanation—and much more careful research than is likely to be done would be required for certainty—it is a matter of everyday observation that Italian, Polish, and even Irish Catholics are largely absent from the world of the elite private universities, the large foundations, the national mass media, the big financial institutions (as opposed to manufacturing corporations), and certain of the intellectually oriented government agencies. At a national meeting concerned with the lack of women and nonwhite scholars this was attributed to the "intellectual inferiority produced by Catholic religious belief." Women and blacks, I was told, are absent because of discrimination, Catholic ethnics because their religion interferes with intellectual achievement. This explanation was offered with a straight face and obvious sincerity.

In fact, since 1960 Catholics have not been underrepresented in those groups pursuing academic careers, finishing dissertations, publishing articles, or even obtaining tenured appointments at the major state universities. The myth of Catholic intellectual inferiority simply will not stand up to examination in the light of valid empirical evidence—at least not for Catholics who are under 35, presumably the grandchildren of the immigrants. (Given where the eastern and southern European immigrants began, what is surprising is not that their children did not become scholars in proportionate numbers but that their grandchildren did.) If a religio-
ethnic group is intellectually good enough to get its young people on the faculties of Michigan, Wisconsin, and California but not quite good enough to make it at Columbia, Yale, Harvard, or Chicago, one begins to wonder what subtle criteria for intellectual excellence are being used at the elite private schools.

There would be very few who would question that the lower occupational scores of the blacks who attended college are the result of discrimination. Unless one can come up with solid evidence for another explanation, intellectual honesty should compel one to take very seriously the possibility that the same explanation should be applied to the lower scores of Polish, Irish, and Italian Catholics.

**Recovering the past**

If there is any ethnic militancy at all, it is to be found not in the vast middle and lower reaches of income and occupational prestige but rather among the elite, those college-educated and graduate-school-educated ethnics who bump up against the residual nativism still present in the upper strata of American society: It is not the Slovakian steelworkers but the Michael Novaks who are the most likely to be angry—and with good reason. Or, as far as that goes, it is not the Irish cop or the Irish politician or the Irish attorney who grows angry at elite nativism, for they either do not encounter it or it does not affect them. (The reader may judge for himself whether the author of this article is an angry militant.)

Those of us who stand on the shoulders of the immigrants are ill at ease with our predecessors. Their raw acquisitiveness embarrasses us, and their sacrifices and sufferings cause us pain. It is hard to admit that we owe a great deal to those who came before us. We repress memories of places like the Stanislowowo in the same way we repress memories of such disasters as the Spanish Influenza or the Great Depression; they are too terrible and too close for us to think about very much. It took a long, long time before a movie like *Hester Street* could be made, and it may be another generation or two before the descendants of those brave, strong, ambitious young people who swarmed into this country between 1890 and 1914 will be able to relax sufficiently to place those urban pioneers alongside the other brave people who came over the Appalachian mountains a century earlier to pioneer an unexplored continent. The miracle of the frontier is now a standard part of American mythology. Perhaps by the tricentennial the ethnic miracle will have become one of the respected marvels of the American story.