Chapter 1: Introduction

We were submerged beneath a conquest so complete that the very name of us

means something not ourselves…I feel as I should think an Indian might feel, in

the face of ourselves that were. - Barrett Wendell

Today, in a manner unknown since the arrival of the Pilgrims, the cultural centre

of the American nation is fragmenting. The results of the Year 2000 census show

Hispanics to be overtaking African-Americans as the largest minority, while non-

Hispanic whites have declined to just two-thirds of the U.S. population, a minority in the

most populous state of California. Contemplating their demographic decline, white

Americans are engaging in an increasingly bitter, internecine "culture war" which pits

liberal against conservative in a polarized political climate. Against a demographic

backdrop known as the "Browning of America," the forces of multiculturalism vie for

influence with popular initiatives proclaiming "English Only," "immigration reform" and

a Christian America.

Few have considered the possibility that the culture wars of today represent the

continuation of an earlier theme. A generalized amnesia brought on by today's

information age may be the culprit, though the post-modern penchant for discontinuity

and presentism likely hits closer to the mark. Hence the fallacy that once bitter conflict

within white America between old-stock Protestants and newer-stock Catholics or Jews

has little to do with contemporary cultural issues in which "race" is the key cleavage and

"white" Americans the principal reference point. Finally, in a large society like the

United States, there is a tendency to imagine that the country operates in a social vacuum, with its own "exceptional" dynamic of change.

This volume takes issue with each of these claims, asserting that the United States, like most European nations, possessed an ethnic "core"[1] and that the unravelling of a dominant "American" *ethnic* group is a recent phenomenon, a juggernaut which largely determines the vector of American cultural change. The direction of this change, I contend, did not crystallize in the 1960's, but was actually set in the early decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to the important recent work of Desmond King (2000) and Rogers Smith (1997), I consider nativist excess to be a far less distinct feature of the early twentieth century than liberal innovation. I trace this liberal innovation to its sources *within* WASPdom and attempt to deconstruct the notion of a united WASP ethnic actor. It is the internecine schism within the Anglo-Protestant soul, and not inter-ethnic conflict, which is the principal focus of this book. The victory of Anglo-Protestant Americans' liberal alter-ego was a sea-change of world-historical significance whose ideological momentum has set the parameters within which today's debates operate.

Hence, by the yardstick of history, questions of immigration and national identity in both the United States and the wider western world are contested within a comparatively narrow liberal band. Each side tends to employ the language of Enlightenment liberty and equality (conservatives use "equal treatment" and "individual rights," while liberals speak of "equal results" and "individual self-esteem.") What few on the conservative side are willing to do is to speak about an "America for Americans," or describe non-white immigrants as "beaten members of beaten breeds." (King 1998: 131) Those on the Left likewise refrain from mass appeals to an organic social whole based on

the native-born working man. Moreover, the notion of an "American" ethnic nation defined in a white or WASP mould is definitely no longer on the cards.

Yet it is instructive to note how different things were not so long ago. In the 1920's, the United States consolidated its Anglo-Protestant ethnic character in a series of legislative actions: the Volstead Act of 1920 prohibited the consumption of alcohol; the Johnson-Reed Act shaped immigration flows around a quota system designed to preserve WASP dominance; and Al Smith, a Catholic of part-Irish extraction, was defeated in his bid for the presidency in 1928. Nativist commentators glowed with praise for a U.S. Congress whose ethnic composition matched that of the Continental Congress of 1787. In communities large and small, powerful Protestant voluntary associations like the Ku Klux Klan, D.A.R., Masons and A.P.A. nurtured the bonds of white Protestant ethnicity and enforced Anglo-American hegemony. Ninety percent of white Protestants, Catholics and Jews married members of their own faith as late as the 1960's.

Then, as if by magic, the centuries-old machinery of WASP America began to stall like the spacecraft of Martian invaders in the contemporary hit film, *War of the Worlds*. In 1960, the first non-Protestant president was elected. In 1965, the national origins quota immigration regime was replaced by a "colour-blind" system. Meanwhile, Anglo-Protestants faded from the class photos of the economic, political and cultural elite - their numbers declining rapidly, year upon year, in the universities, boardrooms, cabinets, courts and legislatures. At the mass level, the cords holding Anglo-Protestant Americans together began to unwind as secular associations and mainline churches lost millions of members while the first truly national, non-WASP cultural icons appeared. Not only were barriers to non-WASP ethnic groups virtually eliminated at all levels of

American life, but national institutions appeared to be re-applying the idea of communalism in an inverse manner. Namely, the old Anglo-Protestant *ethnie* was replaced by minority ethnic communities as the recipient of collective privilege.

How did such a stunning transformation take place between the 1920's and the 1960's? A recent article by John Higham provides the only sustained attempt to focus on this phenomenon. Here Higham, arguably the most astute observer of his own ethnic group, notes that the full story of the "shattering defeat" of WASP hegemony between the 20's and the 60's "has never been told." (Higham 2000: 51-2) Indeed, the best that the current literature can offer are a series of speculative concluding paragraphs in historical works on the ethno-nationalism of the 1880-1925 period, together with a number of more recent essayistic treatises on the "decline of the WASP." (Gossett 1953, 1963; Higham 1955, 1975; Jackson 1967; Schrag 1973; Christopher 1989; Baltzell 1990; Brookhiser 1991; Lind 1995) There also exists a literature on the rise of multiculturalism, which traces this trend to the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. (Schlesinger 1993; Glazer 1997; King 2000) In most current analyses, the "decline of the WASP" is treated as a demographic inevitability of only limited relevance to today's debates about whiteness and multiculturalism.

The current study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by examining the decline of American dominant ethnicity - whether in its pre-1960's "WASP" or post-60's "white" incarnation - as a socio-political phenomenon. To probe into this phenomenon is to raise as many questions as answers. Was the decline caused by demographic forces, a consequence of fertility differentials between WASPs and others? Perhaps politico-economic factors were paramount, a result of "push-pull" conditions which drew foreign

labour (and hence voters) to American shores from increasingly non-British or non-white sources and propelled their children up the political ladder. Then again, it could be the case that WASP Americanism survived by absorbing other white Americans into itself and transmuting into a new "Euro-American", or "Anglo" *racial* group. In tandem, these are the most popular explanations for what happened.

Yet, even in combination, they do not satisfy. Indeed, it is easy to forget that few of the world's dominant ethnic groups, if any, have yielded to pressure from contending subaltern *ethnies*. Less than 10 percent of the world's states are ethnically homogeneous. In a third of states, the majority group comprises less than half the population. (Connor 1994: 39) However, dominant ethnic groups like the Romanians of Romania or Persians of Iran generally do not feel "compelled" by political and economic rationality to recognize minority group desires - even where these are backed up by a strong territorial claim (which has rarely been the case in the American context). Instead, nation-building, assimilation or ethnic hegemony has been the typical response, as it was throughout most of American history.

One example is particularly apposite in this regard. In 1776, on the eve of American independence, Hungary was less than 40% Magyar (the dominant group). Convinced of the need for ethnic group action, the Magyars embarked on a project of ethnic assimilation which resulted in their attainment of majority status and the consolidation of their ethnic hegemony within several generations. A similar tale could be told for many other dominant groups, notably the Turks and Malays. On the contrary, American history from the 1920's onward reads like the usual script in reverse: whereas Magyars formed just 40% of Hungary's population in 1776, the United States was nearly

65% British in ancestry and fully 98% Protestant. Today, British Protestants make up less than a quarter of the population and have seemingly abandoned their hegemonic designs. This calls for an explanation that goes beyond the politico-economic.

Accordingly, I contend that the changing "backdrop" of Anglo-Protestant cultural activity was a more important factor than the struggle of subaltern ethnic groups, which is, as noted, a universal phenomenon. In effect, cultural and ideological changes originating from *within* the Anglo-Protestant community are singled out as the primary engine of dominant ethnic decline. This is where multiculturalism enters our picture. The latter has become a potent symbol, a convenient reference point around which people can situate themselves as "for" or "against." In analytical terms, however, this term is frequently tossed around with scant regard for conceptual clarity, hence the typical belief that the United States has evolved from a melting-pot (either nasty or benign) into a multicultural mosaic (of wonderful diversity or fractious fragmentation). More subtle observers of the evolution of American ethnic relations favour an 'Anglo-America - Melting Pot - Multiculturalism' paradigm.

Yet these are flawed models which break down under scrutiny. As an alternative, I outline a divergent interpretation of the trajectory of American national identity and ethnic relations. First, one may speak of a *dominant ethnic* phase of Americanism, a "vertical mosaic,"[2] marked by white, Anglo-Protestant hegemony and strong ethnic boundaries. "We [WASP] Chestnut Hillers," recalled Digby Baltzell with regard to his inter-war upbringing, "were as isolated from the rest of the city as ghetto Jews." (Baltzell [1988] 1990: 37) The dominant-ethnic phase to which Baltzell refers was followed by the current *liberal-egalitarian* stage, in which liberal and egalitarian concerns have pared the

nation's identity down to its most neutral, Enlightenment essentials. During this second phase, which began in force during the Second World War and was consummated in the 1960's, previously marginalized ethnic groups attained rough institutional parity with Anglo-Protestants, a development that has been accompanied by a relaxation of *all* ethnic group boundaries. Racial minorities were not as successful, but the process of change involved both white and non-white groups *simultaneously*.

Thus there was no discrete "Euro-American melting-pot" phase when reformers targeted marginalized white ethnics while ignoring the concerns of racial minorities - all were swept up in the current of liberal-egalitarian idealism which began as a trickle in the first decade of the twentieth century and crested in the 1960's. As liberty and equality were refined from the WASP cultural inheritance, they successively turned on their cocoon of Anglo-Saxonism, Protestantism, and finally, Whiteness. Thus multiculturalism, and its seemingly contradictory "post-modern" alter-ego, are less "post" modern than radically modern. Multiculturalism expresses this hyper-individuated logic of liberal-egalitarianism, and in fact has little to do with a communitarian return to ethnicity.

Structure of the Book

Chapter two, entitled "The Rise of Dominant Ethnicity in the United States," examines the development of the Anglo-Saxon myth of origin, the Protestant "voluntary establishment" and the story of the Yeoman Republic. It goes on to describe the

institutional practices, such as Anglo-conformity and immigration restriction, which constituted the nation along Anglo-Protestant lines.

Chapters three and four reveal the unstable tension between the ethnocentric and liberal mindstates of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American psyche. For example, the third chapter pursues the Emersonian paradox of "double-consciousness," illustrating how prominent nineteenth-century American liberals embraced both universalism and Anglo-Protestant nationalism. Chapter four addresses the nature of egalitarianism in the nineteenth century, claiming that reformers and socialists in the progressive era were firmly committed to Anglo-Protestant Americanism.

Chapter five represents a decisive break: here for the first time, we consider a truly cosmopolitan[3] social movement in the Liberal Progressive wing of turn-of-the-century Progressivism. The intellectual evolution of this groundbreaking *cénacle* is traced through the Settlement movement (especially at Jane Addams' Hull House) and the thinking of a number of largely Chicago-based intellectuals, notably John Dewey. Chapter six continues to map the institutional dimensions of early American cosmopolitanism, this time focusing upon ecumenical Protestantism. Accordingly, it examines the history of organized Protestant thinking on the matter of American national identity. The pattern that emerges demonstrates that mainline Protestant elites gradually abandoned the Protestant crusade in favour of a "left-liberal" posture during 1905-1918.

Chapter seven shifts the emphasis from equality to expressive individuality. Consequently, this section traces the advent of expressive individualism among the "Young Intellectuals" of Greenwich Village, in pre-WWI New York City. These New Yorkers are treated as the founders of an anti-WASP counter-cultural tradition that

extended through the Muckrakers of the 1920s and New York Intellectuals of the 1930's

to the New Left of the 60's. The following chapter, entitled "Ethical Institutionalization,"

uses survey data to demonstrate how the cosmopolitan ideas of the Liberal Progressives,

Liberal Protestants and New York Intellectuals attained mass hegemony by 1970.

Chapter nine, "The Decline of Dominant Ethnicity in the United States,"

employs a wide range of evidence to support the case that the dominance of Anglo-

Protestantism has waned in the United States. I also claim that, contrary to popular belief,

ethnicity *as a whole* is largely in decline in the U.S., and that communal identities are

being replaced by more privatized, post-ethnic forms of belonging. Chapter ten considers

theoretical explanations for WASP decline, while chapter eleven probes the contours of

more recent white "Anglo" nationalism.

The final chapter shifts gears to consider some of the normative implications of

this research. Where *should* the nation go? Here the book outlines a theory of "liberal

ethnicity" which will hopefully confound champions of simplistic formulae, whether

multiculturalist or assimilationist. The idea of liberal ethnicity is offered as a paradigm

which can synthesize, yet supersede, both the dominant-ethnic and liberal-egalitarian

models. The quest for an unhyphenated American national identity is, I claim, a chimera

which ignores the importance of all (including WASP) ethnic ties. Americanizers would

do better to focus on privately hewing a new, sub-state American ethnic group.

However, while multiculturalism is an appropriate response to American

diversity, I conclude that it ought to be considerably reformed - divorced from its

adversarial, anti-WASP past to appeal to a wider, more centrist constituency. It must lose

its asymmetrical properties and should be framed as a global, rather than specifically

American, idea. A cultural revival unleashed by this shift in worldview may lead to an

enrichment of American life: to a qualitative Americanism based on culture rather than a

quantitative Americanism based on the ephemerata of politico-economic success.

Notes – ch. 1

[1] See Smith 1986.

[2] The Canadian sociologist John Porter coined this structure a "vertical mosaic," in reference to WASP dominance in Canada. (Porter 1965)

[3] From the Greek "cosmo" and "polis", meaning "the world is my city." Anthony Smith argues that cosmopolitanism has traditionally been viewed by nationalists as the antithesis of nationalism and ethnicity. Smith adds that cosmopolitanism has a long pedigree that embraces the history of most of the major empires and religious realms. However, in its current, postmodernist form, Smith maintains that cosmopolitanism constitutes a "memoryless," problematic entity. (Smith 1990: 6; 1990b: 174-75; 1995: 19-21)

For Ulf Hannerz, cosmopolitanism is more of an ideology of the Self which entails a set of relationships to a diversity of cultures. In his words, "a more genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity." (Hannerz 1990: 239) Whereas ethnic identity is delimited in territorial (space) and ancestral (time) terms, cosmopolitanism will be used to describe the phenomenon of spaceless, timeless, "virtual" identity. Fields of cosmopolitan activity need not be global in scale - though global extension often constitutes the goal of a cosmopolitan social movement.