

# **Cultural Resilience and Ethnic Well-Being: Implications for American Muslims**

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## **Abstract**

American Muslims represent a normative minority, yet, they live in a reality where race and ethnicity loom large. This paper argues that the ethnic dynamics of the American life are highly meaningful in explaining American Muslim reality and their future. Those dynamics include cultural and structural dimensions, which call for a conceptualization of the varied paths of integration that Muslims can potentially assume. Informed by the trajectories of American ethnic minorities, this paper asserts that the integration of a minority group within the majority society is a dynamic process of negotiation. While economics and politics carve structural niches for minorities, their lived reality is ultimately determined by the interaction between the material conditions of those structural niches and the cultural webs in which the collective souls of minority members reside. To analyze such complex terms of integration, the paper revisits the conceptualization of ethnicity, synthesizing elements from the primordial and the constructivist perspectives—interests and circumstances that mold the lives of minority groups are acknowledged as well as the symbolic qualities of their shared memories. Similarly, in order to account adequately for the otherwise fluid use of the concept of culture, the paper differentiates between cultural preservation, cultural maintenance, and cultural resilience. Those represent three strategies in which a minority manages its culture in reference to the pervasive societal culture. The stance of the dominant majority and its view of the minority are also considered. The paper argues that the combination of structural violence reflected in the depreciation of the minority's material resources, and cultural violence reflected in the devaluation of symbolic capital, lead to the decay of the communities, pushing them into a vicious circle of social decay. The main contribution of the paper lies in theorizing how the well-being of a minority group is predicated upon the level of its cultural reliance.

## Introduction

Writings about American Muslims often focus on a narrow aspect, painting them as a group at odds with western societies. While the uniqueness of the Muslim case cannot be denied, they ultimately are human beings upon which social laws apply. This paper argues that the ethnic dynamics of the American society cannot be ignored in understanding American Muslim minority. However, American Muslims cannot be adequately conceived of being a numeric minority; rather, they represent a normative minority in which the cultural question becomes central.

The paper starts by discussing the concept of ethnicity on which perspectives diverge. While the primordial perspective stresses the historically rooted, the symbolic dimensions, and the stationary aspects of ethnicity, the constructivist view stresses conflict and interests, and the continually changing aspects of ethnicity. This paper synthesizes elements from the two perspectives. Historical memories and the perception of peoplehood are real in the lives of ethnic groups, and so are the dynamics in which they are embroiled, dynamics that add to their perceptual repertoire and slowly alter the character of the group. Moreover, accounting for the interaction between cultural and structural elements steers the discussion away from deterministic models.

Before proceeding, a word on terminology is due. In the discussion below, I will not differentiate between pluralism and multiculturalism; I will consider the latter as a manifestation of the former. Furthermore, the paper will consider race as a special case ethnicity, as a visible marker of ethnicity. Race does ignite dynamics on its own. However, conceptually they are ethnic dynamics. I am aware of the controversy surrounding such use of concepts, and my choice goes beyond convenience and simplification, a choice that cannot be defended in this paper.

The paper's main contribution lies in defining the relationship between cultural resilience and ethnic well-being. Such reconsideration is important because it forms the backdrop for thinking about the future ethnic relations in western democracies in which Muslims are embroiled.

## Ethnicity between primordialism and Circumstantialism

Ethnicity is one of those concepts that can mean different things. Weber states the following regarding the meaning of ethnicity: “We shall call ‘ethnic groups’ those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration” (Weber *Economy and Society* 1968:389). Absent in Weber’s definition is culture, which constitutes the hallmark of ethnicity. Most definitions of ethnicity thereafter invoked culture in one way or another.

However, the concept of culture is wide-ranging. Therefore, by saying that culture is a major aspect without which ethnicity could not be understood, we need to exclude miniature cultures formed within small groups, invoking instead culture as representing the totality of the value and symbolic order of a group, usually a large group, and invariably a culture that has historical depth. To sum up, most definitions of ethnicity converge on four meanings, as suggested by Cornell et al.:

1. Real or assumed common decent—blood ties
2. It is a subjective matter; it is how we see ourselves
3. The bases of commonality vary from physical resembled to shared cultural practiced to a shared historical experience of intergroup interaction
4. It is part of the foundation of a community (p. 17).

The above discussion should clarify the range of meanings of the term ethnicity, which are not contradictory, rather, reinforce each other. Yet, two more conceptual wrinkles need to be clarified: the inside and the outside of ethnicity, and the changeability of ethnicity. In response to the first point, we can talk about ethnicity from the viewpoint of the larger society. There could be many variations in this regard, but in most cases, there is a dominant group of large numbers and smaller groups with less of social power, as the case in the United States is. In such cases, Jenkins (1994) reminds us, that the “ethnic category is externally defined, but the ethnic group is internally defined.<sup>1</sup>” This is a crucial point that directly relates to the dilemmas of integration, a point of which this paper is mindful. Rephrasing Marx, we can say that ethnic groups make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornell 1998:20.

After visiting the challenge of defining *what* ethnicity is, the next challenge is to account for it in terms of permanence and change. There is a chasm in the literature between the perspectives of primordialism and circumstantialism. While circumstantialism can recruit a large body of empirical evidence on the fluidity of ethnicity, it largely misses accounting for its soul. Geertz, the spokesperson of primordialism, reminds us that ethnicity in human history proved to be something deeply meaningful and uniquely powerful, and that ethnic ties “seem to flow more from a sense of natural—some would say spiritual—affinity than from social interaction.<sup>1</sup>” However, primordialism is more relevant in the context of people living in their homeland. In contrast, when speaking in terms of ethnicity outside of its original habitat, whether it is the result of voluntary immigration or forced displacement, the primordial elements of ethnicity change in complex ways.

Conceptualizing ethnic and racial categories after the arrival to a new cultural sphere necessarily shifts in the direction of circumstantialism, supplanting primordial identity at times, relegating it to symbolic ethnic dimensions at another, or producing a hybrid outcome. There are several factors that influence such an outcome: size, density, and context. The size of a minority and the rate of their growth are crucial factors in the affecting the change in ethnic identity.<sup>2</sup> In the case of a small minority, especially that which is accepted by the host society, primordialism recedes to a minimum. However, when ethnicity is embodied in a sizable minority, primordialism forms the base upon which the dynamics of circumstantialism play. Crucial to all that is the context in which the minority group was incorporated into the larger society, including economic, political, and cultural considerations, an aspect that will be discussed later in the paper.

Discussing some examples from the United States history facilitates adding important details to the conceptualization of the primordialism-circumstantialism continuum. Primordial ethnicity for the waves of Scandinavians, Albanians, Arabs, Argentineans, etc., as expected, receded to a minimum—small numbers and relative

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz. “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States.” Pp.105-157 in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz, NY: Free Press, 1963, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Turner book on inequality

favorable context. The Polish, the Russian, and the Italians of the Second Great Stream, 1880-1914, dubbed as “White Ethnics,” also faced a relative favorable context upon arrival. However, since they were sizable in numbers, why primordialism does not explain their case?

We need to remember here is that the label “White Ethnics” was a retroactive label. When those immigrant groups arrived, they did not form one group, but the dominant group in the society “felt” them as similar to each other. Polish immigration trickled in low numbers along the decades since late 1900. In contrast, Italian immigration trickled for a longer time, but had a sharp rate of accumulation between the 1990s and 1920s. Consistent with the conceptualization above, Italian assimilation took longer as primordialism fared higher. However, the crucial factor did not simply lie in numbers, rather, in the larger context of the race. The unresolved status of Blacks after legal emancipation conditioned the incorporation terms of all subsequent immigrant groups. White Ethnics solidified whiteness and contributed to its assumed normality and, and served as an assertion to the neutrality of the American social system. Racial boundaries become further problematized, and the in-between status of White Ethnics in late 19<sup>th</sup> c. and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. was not sustainable and was not preferable for both the dominant whites and the new Europeans. In other words, race strongly boosted the dynamics of circumstantialism to relegate primordialism to a minimum. The cultural background of those new arrivals was also a factor that will be discussed later in the paper.

The case of Cubans also serves as an illustration although it seems at first as an anomaly. Early Cuban immigration waves were relatively small in numbers, and they were received in a positive political atmosphere, qualifying them to receive governmental help. However, the high concentration of Cubans in one geographical areas as well as the structure of an economic opportunity of small entrepreneurial activities contributed to the maintenance of a highly differentiated ethnic identity. However, the realities of race and Latino immigration were also a crucial factor, especially if we consider post-1980 wave and Cubans becoming more internally diversified. The case of Cubans is specifically instructional. Despite their favorable context of the early encounter, their collective

identification shifted back to become more Hispanic due to political events that tested their relative whiteness.<sup>1</sup>

While race buttresses circumstantialism as groups maneuver their way out of overt oppression or subtle discrimination, religion buttresses primordialism. Since in the consciousness of the average immigrant religion is less abstract and cognitive and more phenomenological and experiential, it contributes to the extension of primordialism. The cases of Armenians, Lebanese Maronites are highly informative in that regard. When ethnicity is connected to a religion, especially scriptural religions, primordialism becomes reformulated. The Armenians and the Maronites are special cases since their religions are connected to a land, all of which contribute to primordialism<sup>2</sup>. Again, emigration of a small group erodes primordialism since it deprives it from necessary nutrients as the seeds in the new soil bear new fruits. However, religion works in the opposite, or parallel, direction, contributing to a “renewed primordialism,” not exactly a replica of the old although seen primordial. Moreover, religion can serve as an incubator for a *new* primordialism. We can speak here of Smith’s process of the “invention of tradition.”<sup>3</sup> This process is more relevant to Muslims, as we will see.

In sum, the above discussion acknowledges circumstantialism as an important force while recognizes the weight of primordialism—a dynamic rooting process. Circumstantialism and primordialism do seek different goals, but both of them are driven by the same intersecting ethnic factors. It should be noted here that one should not speak of pure circumstantialism. Interest-based political and economic considerations affect ethnic identity in large ways and they do shape the final ethnic product. Nevertheless, as Cornell succinctly put it: the analysis of identities should start “not with interest, which are subjectively determined, but with the circumstances that put the group in particular positions and encourage them to see their interests in particular ways... Circumstances

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<sup>1</sup> Portes and

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the Jewish case is highly instructive here. However, due to its complexity and uniqueness, it was excluded as a confirming case.

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may create ethnic and racial groups and identities not through a logic of interest so much as through a logic of social organization<sup>1</sup>”.

The choice of this paper is to depart from the fixity of primordialism, understood as passive inheritance and unadulterated continuity, to an understanding of primordialism as yearning to cultural belonging, mostly but not completely, imbued with a sense of historical rootedness. It is part of *fitra* to have primordial yearnings; yet, the realizations of those yearnings take many shapes and colors depending on the circumstances of different cultural groups of people, and different subgroups within a single group. This view synthesizes elements from both perspectives, adding plasticity to primordialism and anchorages to circumstantialism. It allows for tracing change in the very meaning of ethnicity in the eyes of its beholders as well as capturing the forces of circumstances that carve out different spaces and activate certain ethnic elements.

Appreciating the complexity of ethnicity and the central place it takes in the lives of people is crucial for understanding Muslims of the United States. That is specifically true given the continuously inflammatory situation of ethnic and race relations in the US. However, since culture is at heart of ethnicity, the full range of ethnic dynamics cannot be adequately understood without shedding light on the complex and illusive concept of culture; that is what the following sections briefly discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornell 1998:p. 59

## On Culture and Agriculture

Speaking of pluralism brings to the fore the concept of culture, the substance that is involved in the process of integration. Unfortunately, the term culture is often loosely invoked and the meaning of culture widely varies even in academic use. It is therefore helpful to present a quick review of the conceptualization of culture, as mapped by Wuthnow and Witten<sup>1</sup>. He suggests that we can think of culture in explicit or implicit terms. Culture as explicit is a kind of a good or commodity that is produced. Within such a view, culture is studied in terms of specific works, such as art, books, rituals, speech acts, tool kits, or ideological movements. The work of Bourdieu, Swidler, and Wuthnow represents contributions in studying culture at this level<sup>2</sup>. Also, field and qualitative research fits this category<sup>3</sup>.

The second kind of conceptualizing culture visualizes it as an implicit feature in life. Culture here is an inherent feature of life, “constituting the underlying assumptions and expectations on which social interaction depends.” For example, Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge fits this conceptualization culture, and so is Parson’s idea of the “normative underpinnings of social action.” This conceptualization of culture may speak of the “axiological principles that govern civilizations,” as invoked by Weber in his analysis of the role of beliefs and presuppositions in conditioning economic behavior. What follows is that culture is seen “as part of the established structure or framework of social action... as a prefiguration or ground of social relations” (Wuthnow 1988:50).

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<sup>1</sup> Wuthnow, Robert and Marsha Witten. 1988. “New Directions in the Study of Culture.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 14:49-67.

<sup>2</sup> A specific focus of such authors is to demythologize the concept of culture and put it in concrete terms, as a toolkit, an objective manifestation rooted in networks, or a strategy. To the extent these seminal works elaborate the concept culture and make it more usable in the analysis of different groups, it may slip into a utilitarian view of culture. See Ann Swidler. “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies.” *American Sociological Review*, 51: 273-286, 1986; Robert Wuthnow. *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis*, Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> There are numerous studies of this kind. Culture here related to a small group and usually confined to one aspect of social life. Insightful and informative as they are, they are a mark of American sociology, in particular, and they may divert the attention of larger frameworks of culture.

Herbert Blumer, “Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection.” *Sociological Quarterly* 10:275-291, 1969; Gary Alan Fine, “Small Groups and Culture Creation: The Idioclature of Little League Baseball Teams.” *American Sociological Review*, 44: 733-745, 1979; Theodore Caplow, “Rule Enforcement Without Visible Means: Christmas Gift Giving in Middletown.” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 89:1306-1323, 1984; Sharon Bohh Gmlech, “Groups that Don’t Want in: Gypsies and Other Artisan, Trader, and Entertainer Minorities.” *Annual Review of Anthology* 15:307-330, 1986; Chryis Ingraham. *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1999.

Another simpler and useful mapping of the concept of culture is found in sociology introduction books: culture as an outlook (perception and meta-cognition), normative culture (norms, folkways, and popular beliefs), and material culture (artifacts and technology)<sup>1</sup>.

This paper relates pluralism to culture in the sense of a core and implied outlook, not the explicit and outer manifestation of culture. The paper also points to language, which is an important element of culture that escapes categorization.

Further metatheoretical concerns should be noted before proceeding to the full discussion of pluralism and multiculturalism. Indeed, no adequate discussion on integration of ethnic groups is possible without pointing to the ontological view of human beings: do we consider people as *homoeconomicus* or as *homocultural* beings? The implications of such ontological view affect every aspect of desired pluralism, including the criteria of selection, the formula of amalgamation, and the moral weights of cultural items.

The popular models of pluralism make sense only within the modernist stimuli-response perception of reality. Within such a view the appreciation of other cultures is coached in the language of individuals making choices. Models of pluralism do offer measured consideration of different cultures, but they do so mainly as paying respect to the choices of actors shopping in a global mall. Moreover, these models delusionally assume the absence of evaluative criteria in taking into account other cultures. They assume that their consideration of other people's cultural items is not connected to any evaluative criterion, and they assume that it is possible for multiple cultures to coexist without the reference to evaluative criteria. Intoxicated with the vocabulary of relativism, the discourse of multiculturalism turns into religious sloganism. As the fervor of the 1960s social movements formed the backdrop of multiculturalism, hedonism as well as banal fascination with the exotic "other" was dominant. It was no accident that this multicultural impulse had a mono-taste, namely a white taste. With all of its soft

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropology, sociology, and the humanities, use the concept of culture in their own ways, but not without significant overlap. The use of anthropologists is the most general, while that of humanists is often the most delimited. See Berger, Bennett M. *An Essay on Culture*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1995, pp. 14-21.

heartedness, the cultural items of others amount to enjoyable foreplay in cultural intercourse. Add capitalism to the mix, and you get a marketplace that is open to varied cultural expressions insofar as they are open to commodification.

In contrast, if people were considered *homocultural* beings, then their cultures would have to be seen as part of the very fabric of their lives. The chasm between those two ontological perspectives is not a matter of theoretical abstraction that has no bearing on reality. Rather, the chasm points to different societal configurations when accommodating diverse cultures.

The title of this section, On Culture and Agriculture, should now make sense. Culture speaks of rootedness, of an atmosphere necessary to life, and for continuation. This sharply contrasts to the focus on the material aspects of culture, folkways, customs, and rituals, which constructs a colorful yet thin cloak of pluralism. This is the celebrated view of pluralism. It is thin because, for example, if a cultural group speaks of joy when its members chant in a certain way, how one can dispute their joy? If they deem a specific color as appropriate in certain occasions, how one can judge their taste? Unfortunately, the softhearted humanistic approach to pluralism turns mechanical despite its heightened sense of appreciation. Focusing on the lower levels of culture naturally turns into an add-and-stir view of pluralism, whether it is melting-pot pluralism or salad bowl pluralism. Moreover, with the absence of pointing to selection criteria such an approach is likely to turn narcissistic despite its claim of not being value-laden. In addition, this view is silent on, or incapable of, speaking of embracing other cultures and attending to possible conflicting elements. That leads to neglecting power in social life as if it has no role in cultural encounters. Furthermore, and worse of all, such an approach leads to complete relativism.

Again, the agriculture metaphor should now have become clear. Cultures are like plants. They are not formed of exchangeable parts that can be customized. Cultures relate to specific (philosophical) soil and atmosphere. When cultures are transplanted, they stay the same in terms of their constituting nutriment although with time their shell, texture, and taste partially change. Comprehending Muslim existence in the US requires a

complete clarity about the terms of ethnicity and culture. The US is famous about being an open and diverse country. Yet this image needs further examination.

## America, Pluralistic or Diverse?

The outer manifestations of diversity in American life are pervasive to a degree that sidetracks from interrogating the claims of pluralism and examining its nature. From diverse accents heard in large cities to ethnic food options everywhere, the US society glitters the eyes with *first-impression pluralism*. Indeed, one can cite statistics on the factual existence of diversity in the US. However, dissecting such diversity paints quite a different picture. Peter Berger reminds us that “The first wisdom of sociology is this: things are not what they seem.<sup>1</sup>”

If we mean by pluralism the physical existence of diverse groups, then the US was always highly pluralistic. Colonial America was not cohesively English. The lack of ecumenicism among the Christians left them competing Protestant sects with their own cultures, be it German or Swedish. English people made 70% of colonial New England and 40% of the middle colonies, while Africans amounted to 40% in the southern colonies. Such diversity was added upon the diversity of Natives, where, for example, Northwestern Indians differed significantly from Southeastern Indians in many aspects including economic structure and residence patterns<sup>2</sup>. While one would agree that it is “a mistake to presume the English were a single, cohesive entity<sup>3</sup>,” it should be a mistake too to equate such diversity with meaningful pluralism. The irony exists in what we may call *American diversity exceptionalism*. It was always de facto diversity that left its stamp on daily life, but was also plagued with severe forms of oppression, especially against non-European groups, and was embroiled in power dynamics and social strife for the rest of immigrants.

It is appropriate to remind ourselves that the 1790 First Congress passed the Naturalization Law, which limited citizenship only to free White aliens. Until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, people of color born in the United States were not citizens. From President Benjamin Franklin’s complaint: They want to “Germanize us instead our Anglifying them, and never adopt our Language or Customs,” to the mixed

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger. *Invitation to Sociology*. Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1963.

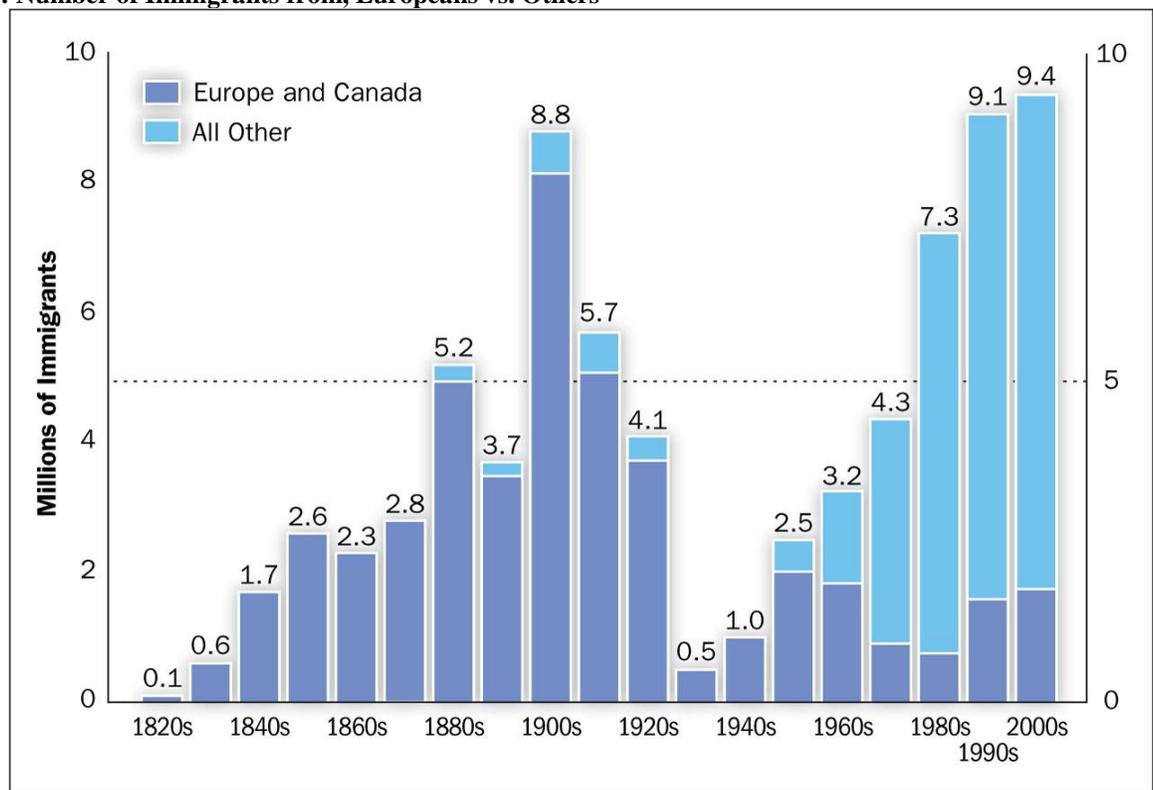
<sup>2</sup> Vincent Parrillo. *Diversity in America*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2005. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 17.

nature of the Americanization Movement, events point to American struggle and ambivalence about diversity, not its embracement and celebration.

The image of the United States as a country of immigrants deserves careful examination. For one it suppresses the understanding of how the relationship with the Natives and African Americans structured the very nature of American diversity. Second, it glosses over the origins of those immigrants and how their cultural background was a key determining their status. The chart below clearly shows that until the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigration waves were mainly of European origins.

**Chart 1: Number of Immigrants from, Europeans vs. Others**



It is this internal contradiction in the United States national character that need to be at the heart of any conceptualization of its ethnic and race relations. The US is indeed a country that continuously received a large number of immigrants. However, those immigrants touched an American soil that has already been racialized, and no group can escape being racialized. The cultural soul of the United States cannot conceive human beings without race; its institutions cannot escape the traps of race even when speaking in terms of colorblindness. Alas, race, or more specifically, race as a problem, is a

constituting part of the American ethos, which it tries to escape from it only to find it a shadow from which it cannot be separated. Thus, the cultural system forces immigrants to be racialized and to develop a consciousness of race in ways they never experienced. Coming in large numbers and under conditions more conducive to cultural preservation, immigrants made the United States a nation embroiled in the realities of immigration, simultaneously as it is embroiled in the elemental racial dynamics. The racial nature of the nation and its immigration realities are neither contradictory nor simply two aspects of the United States' being. Rather, they are formed in reaction of each other: racial blackness has been constructed as an innate category in contrast to fate-determined superior whiteness, and racial whiteness has been constructed as a default non-race, benign and elected, in contrast to all other racial formations, including that of immigrants. Furthermore, while blackness represented a one-drop that defines the moral and pragmatic polar opposite to whiteness, the status of racialized immigrants became necessarily contingent although considered unmistakably non-white. Structural factors led European immigrants to be granted the *honorary white* position, constructing a neither black nor white racial identification of non-European immigrants, for those two pole categories were already cemented by objective historical developments. As immigrants resisted discrimination and tried to normalize the disturbing realities of emigration, they mobilized their cultural resources to solidify their character. From the inside, such character is highly rich with layers of meaning relevant to ontological security, perception of groupness, and the dealing with life realities, even if the outer manifestation of such cultural world could be seen as vapid or backward. Furthermore, immigrant otherness is not insulated from the larger cultural seen. Rather, it is engaged in an ongoing negotiation that does not simply involve color and physique, but extends to more subtle distinctions<sup>1</sup>, even to the sound of a name<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Or even body *hexis*, in Bourdieu's conceptualization, becoming one form of disposition beyond or as part of *habitus*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Syed Mohamed Mehdi. "Baring the Name of the Prophet." In *Belonging and Banishment: Being Muslim in Canada*, ed. Natasha Bakht. Toronto: Canada, TSAR Publications, 2008, pp. 17-25.

Racialization does not simply relate to discrimination and does not only structure people's cognitive perceptions, as crucial as that is; it also reflects macro dimensions in the historical formation of the system of this nation.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the U.S. always had physical diversity as number of bodies, but pluralism was never an ideal let alone widely accepted. As late as the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the intense nervousness toward pluralism is best expressed in Huntington's thesis<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallerstein—Americanicity

<sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's Identity*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

## Wellbeing and Culture Resilience

The argument so far established that ethnicity marks the lived experiences of all human groupings, and that people are foremost cultural being. Taking these two premises together means that pluralism is the dilemma of all multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies, especially when both of these two dimensions do not overlap. The paper contends that the US did not converge ever on meaningful pluralism and this section furthers the argument by using the historical experiences of US minority groups, examining the connection between minority/ethnic groups' wellbeing and cultural resilience. Speaking of Muslims as a normative group warrants reminding that religion necessarily manifests itself through culture. Thus, the religious experience is part and parcel of cultural re-construction.

I will use three terms to in reference to the fate of minority group culture, and an additional term that combine those three terms at once. The term *cultural preservation* is used to note a static way of preserving own culture with the least effort toward adapting it to new circumstances. In contrast, the term *cultural resilience* is used to highlight deliberative efforts toward the reconstruction of cultural elements to bear on a new reality, holding on the culture's original percepts and springing from its own outlook. Thirdly, the term *cultural maintenance* is used to indicate adaptation that goes beyond preservation, yet, does not reach the upper limit of resilience. This is often described as cultural amalgamation and cultural creolization. Lastly, I will use a fourth term, *cultural perpetuation*, as a general term that stands for any of the three mentioned levels: mere cultural preservation, midway cultural maintenance, or reconstructive cultural resilience. To connect these terms to the concepts of core culture and outer culture, *cultural preservation* is focused on the folkways aspects of culture, *cultural maintenance* is largely focused on the level of norms, and *cultural resilience* of focused on the level of outlook and major values. It should be stressed here that *cultural perpetuating* is a human quest, not a Muslim specific wish. However, different cultural groups have different potentials to *cultural resilience*, which is a complex process entangled with economic, political, and ideational factors.

A brief survey of some American ethnic groups in relations to cultural perpetuation is instructive. *Cultural perpetuation* is customarily used in the context of

minority groups, such as Latinos, Asians, and Blacks. The debate over culture came to the fore also among Whites, although remained a vague quest dubbed as preserving the “American way.” Understandingly, cultural perpetuation takes a sharper meaning among conservative Christians, and an exclusionary one among nativist groups. Among “white ethnics,” cultural preservation converges on some celebratory aspects of ethnic culture, of what is usually referred to as “symbolic ethnicity.”

*Cultural perpetuation* was the quest of Blacks since day one, from the early Muslims who resisted conversion to Garvey in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to Reverend Jeremiah Wright in Chicago in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Cultural perpetuation was and still is a quest in the Black communities, although structural conditions were not conducive to such a goal. The obstacles before cultural perpetuation for African Americans were colossal since the early days. Extracting people from their natural habitat and throwing them in the jungle of a new land necessarily makes cultural perpetuation limited. Add to that the separation of folks from the same village into different plantations, the often fragmentation of families, the lack of a unified language and religion, the nature of communication of the time, and the lack of contact with distant homeland, all put formidable obstacles on cultural perpetuation. The story of African Americans is not only a story of brutal slavery and oppression, it is also a story of cultural genocide. Yet, human resilience tries to recover whatever possible of legacy and memories, and to regroup in wound-healing settings, creating a symbolic order that gives meaning to life. The return of the term “Black” instead of “African American” is one indication to the circumstances that African American culture faced. The disappearance of original African culture<sup>2</sup>, with all of its devastating effects, is usually not highlighted in sociological theories<sup>3</sup>. As discussed above, assimilationist views would not care much

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<sup>1</sup> For a wider view of the resistance of African Muslims in Africa before enslavement and later on in America, see Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. NY: New York University Press, 1998. Also see Rashid Samory, Rashid, Samory, “Divergent Perspectives on Islam in America.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 20:75-90, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eric Lincoln. *The Black Muslims in America*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., [1961] 1994.

<sup>3</sup> I am not arguing here that there is no Black culture, which is a subtle way of further stereotyping blacks. I am simply referring to original African culture and the high ends of it. For a detailed and passionate discussion of this point, see Bob Blauner, *Still the Big News: Racial Oppression in America*, PA, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

about original cultures, and the counter-theories that come from the perspective of historical materialism would naturally not give a primary role to culture. De Bios's concept of twoness points to the problem of forcing together incoherent cultural elements, so does the sociological concept of "assimilation with no integration."

The story of Native Indians highlights the significance of culture in the future status of minority ethnic groups. The genocide of Natives was effective and their defeat was eventually overwhelming. Yet, the structural conditions of Natives allowed cultural pockets to survive. Tribal organization, leadership, and spatial boundaries preserved the remnants of the cultures of Natives. It is always hard to judge which atrocity was more atrocious. Nevertheless, is it not stunning that the average American sympathizes with the Natives while harbor rejectionist attitudes toward Blacks. The Native Indian can confidently boast with Indian chiefs' vision, be it that of Chief Pontiac or the popular wisdom that "earth does not belong to man, man belongs to earth." On the other hand, Blacks can hardly claim their "abantu"—I am because of you. How impressive an illustration it is that Natives in popular culture got their dignifying Disney film, *Pocahontas*, while Blacks got the *Lion King*, which simultaneously celebrated the African wisdom of Rafiki and subtly stereotyped them in the urban accent of the hyenas<sup>1</sup>.

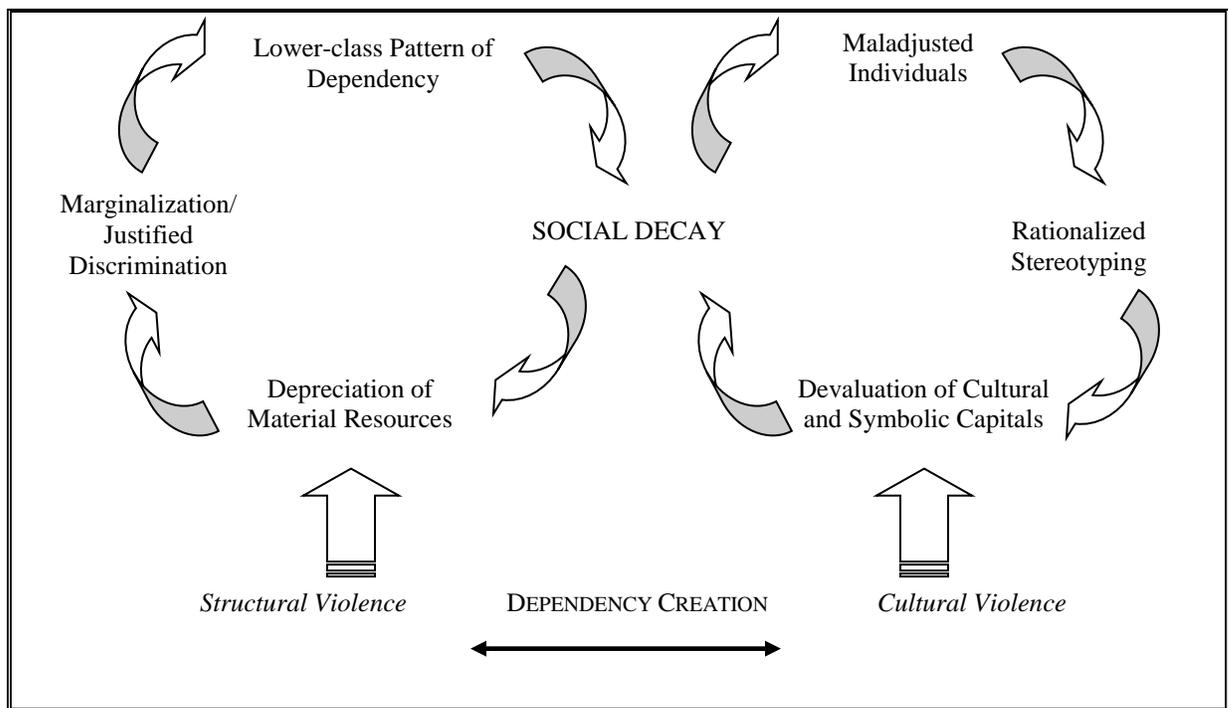
Evidence from other cases is also present. The positive impact of cultural maintenance is evident in the case of Chinese, the Latino, and many other smaller groups. Confidence in the explanatory power of cultural perpetuation is strengthened when we can point to positive and negative cases. That is, if satisfying the condition of cultural perpetuation is associated with higher levels of well-being *and* not satisfying this condition is associated with lower levels of well-being, then cultural perpetuation would be judged as a robust sociological variable of high explanatory power.

While the evidence on the positive impact of cultural perpetuation is overwhelming, principally in boosting the group's social capital and in preventing the deterioration of neighborhoods, that does not mean that we cannot spot areas where it

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<sup>1</sup> Even the wisdom of Rafiki was poised in self-help fashion, pointing the finger back to African Americans that they should not complain about the circumstances of the past.

seems that cultural items<sup>1</sup> were behind the group’s decadence. Yet, the direct blame of ethnic culture in these cases as the ultimate cause of bad fate is doubtful and often reverses the causal arrow<sup>2</sup>. A more adequate explanation is that the combination of several factors, among which is the meager level of resources, leave the group with little to fend itself and prevent from potent rooting of communities. Rather than claiming that cultural perpetuation contributes to decadence by preventing from the adaptation to the wider society and the entrenched system, evidently it is the failure at cultural perpetuation, especially when in reference to the second generation, that is conducive to decadence. The analytical trick here lies in the temporal point of observation. Positively, once a group becomes entangled in underclass conditions, it is hard to differentiate between what is causing what, and some cultural items might contribute to decadence. However, this is a post-facto observation that misses antecedent factors<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> Cornell West speaks of the problem of despair and nihilism in some quarters of black neighborhoods. The Yemenis in Dearborn serve another example.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of Harrison, AJJIS, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that this common sense issue, the idea of blaming the victim, is muddled partially because of the conceptualizations of relativistic humanism—in its drive toward unconditional sympathy, it torpedoes any standard of right and wrong. Is it not a travesty that a senior sociologist of highly perceptive work, Howard Becker, calls prostitutes “victims without crime”?

The discussion here focused on culture alone to make the argument clearer. However, by no means we can neglect structural factors. Furthermore, structural and cultural factors work in tandem, reinforcing the capacity of each, positively or negatively<sup>1</sup>.

### ***The Stance of the Larger Society***

Cultural perpetuation is not a one-way street and it is highly related to the attitude of the dominant in the society and the structural space that it furnishes to minorities. Conceivably, dominance could be achieved through three avenues: (1) the direct result of being numerical majority, usually associated with covert legal advantages; (2) the convergence of interests, accompanied at times with an ideology, by a single group or a coalition of groups; and (3) the successful mobilization of the means of violence that exacts a system of power differentials. The existence of a supposedly democratic political system does not guarantee equality and does not cancel dominance, for dominance rests principally on non-legal factors, and democratic institutions work to normalize, obscure, or even buttress dominance, although they necessarily leave open avenues through which dominance can be contested.

For a given structural space, set by legal, political, and economic factors, the interaction of cultural perpetuation with the variant stances of the dominant produces four possible outcomes: assimilation, subjugation, accommodation, and integration.

First, when an ethnic group fails at cultural perpetuation but the dominant sees the possibility of accepting such a group, the pressures toward assimilation push the minority group toward surrendering incorporation. Interestingly, the failure to perpetuate culture, whether it was intentional or resulted from the collapse of cultural resistance, is likely to be interpreted as a loyal attempt to emulate the majority's superior culture. Accepting such failure and framing it as successful assimilation normalizes the category of an ethnic or minority group, although the dominant dictates the terms of such assimilation and its

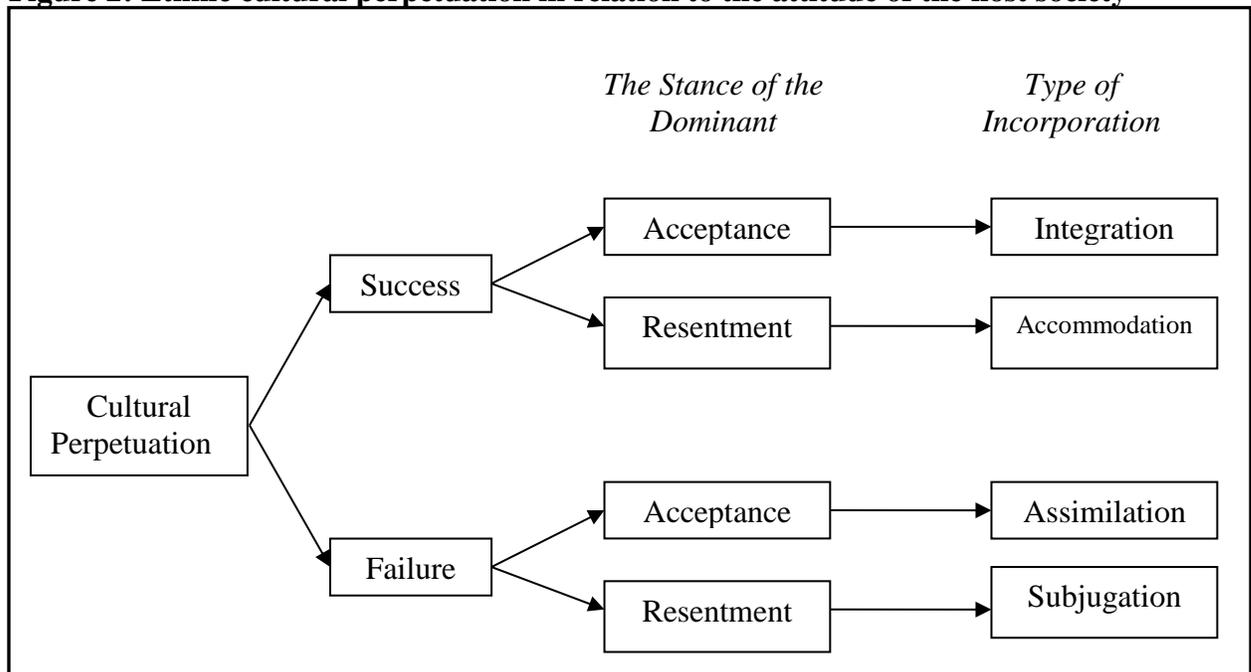
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<sup>1</sup> For a statistical glimpse on the effects of resources and the role of policies in the lives of African Americans, see Thomas M. Shapiro, Tatjana Meschede, and Laura Sullivan, *The Racial Wealth Gap Increases Fourfold*. Institute of Assets and Social Policy. Research and Policy Brief, May 2010. <http://iasp.brandeis.edu/pdfs/Racial-Wealth-Gap-Brief.pdf>, accessed May 17, 2010.

legitimacy. What is accepted of cultural perpetuation here is likely to be mere *cultural preservation* of the lower aspects of culture.

Second, an ethnic group could fail in perpetuating its culture and yet face resentment from the dominant. In this case, indignation and prejudice would relegate the ethnic group to a subjugated status, being at once assimilated and repulsed. The minority group would be seen incapable and unfit for adopting the majority's culture, even if the group's members succumb to it<sup>1</sup>. The outcome here is a state of subjugation. In such a case, even the perpetuation of lower levels of original cultural becomes difficult. Nevertheless, as homocultural beings, and in order to survive, the oppressed ethnic group devises a new culture, drawing on the dominant's cultural basis but interpreting it differently. The minority group, then, is left defend less, has little of its own to organize its community and garner its resource, incapable to defining common goals and motivating its members toward them, and feeble in bestowing dignity as the group's energy dissipates while continuously deflecting prejudice and denigration.

**Figure 2: Ethnic cultural perpetuation in relation to the attitude of the host society**



<sup>1</sup> As it is well known, Malcolm X, and the Nation of Islam movement in general, was acutely aware of that.

A third path in the dominant-dominated relationships occurs when a minority, despite odds, succeeds in cultural perpetuation, thus, faces the resentment of the dominant. The basis of resentment varies, but invariably it includes economic competition and cultural envy—not only that the minority is seen usurping the country’s wealth and resources, but also they are polluting its culture and national character. The case of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese in California is instructive here. Not only they achieved impressive success in agriculture<sup>1</sup>, their non-European culture has all the elements of the mysterious orient<sup>2</sup>. Community solidarity and cooperative agreements with kinsmen created intra-community vertical and horizontal integration<sup>3</sup>; their success was possible through a structural-cultural nexus. The story of the early Chinese is more telling. Among other dynamics, Chinese secrets societies, the Tongs, formed in the new world. Those societies followed patterns created in traditional China, providing assistance and protection for exploited workers<sup>4</sup> and defended their community from hostility<sup>5</sup>. While few would extend admiration to such types of societies, the point here is that the perpetuation of cultural patterns and the creation of social capital, which are mutually enforcing processes, strengthen minority groups and solidify their standing in the larger society<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese migrants started working in railroad construction, canning, lumbering, mining, fishing, and seasonal farm labor. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century they moved into agriculture, controlled 2% of land but produced 30-40% of total California agricultural output. California passed the Alien Land Law in 1913, prohibiting ownership of those who were “ineligible to citizenship.” However, only “free white person” were eligible for citizenship based on the first naturalization act, 1790. Joseph F. Healy, *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change*. Pine Forge, 2006, p. 357.

<sup>2</sup> When Japan won Russia in 1905, the dominant majority in the United States felt uneasy, as it was the first time since Europeans began colonizing the world a “non-white” nation had defeated a “White” nation. The comment of Phelan, a sociology professor at Stanford and later a U.S. senator, is telling: “these Asiatic laborers will undermine our civilization” (cited in Dale McLemore, Harriett Romo, and Susan Gonzalez Baker, *Race and Ethnic Relations in America*. NY: Allyn and Bacon, 2001, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Edna Bonacich and John Modell. *The Economic Basis of Ethnic Solidarity*. CA, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Economic competition was also present in the case of Chinese. At the heels of a declining economy after the Civil War, Chinese were driven away from working in the gold mines, and discrimination was formalized in 1882 by the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schaefer. *Racial and Ethnic Groups*. NY: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008, p. 355.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the activities of such societies could get out of hand and become a curse on the community. It is worth mentioning that all of the Tongs declined since 1970s. The big question is what made these groups loyal to the larger agenda of their communities, and why they did not become a communal liability, as the case is with Blacks and Latinos. The answer might lie in the difference between vigilantly groups and pure gangs, although such difference is delicate and unstable.

This third path of the success of cultural perpetuation that is associated with resentment from the dominant is specifically interesting. That is because the passage of time, and may be predicated on some historical surprises, is bound to bring some respect, even if largely unacknowledged. Accommodation is achieved despite initial and lingering resentment. This counter-intuitive outcome could be explained by what we may call the inherent power of values. The success of the perpetuation of some aspects of ethnic culture in a hostile environment would not be possible should such aspects were void of value. In other words, the survival of cultural elements is a testimony to their relative validity. The expected outcome in this case is accommodation. Accommodation is usually associated with an attitude of tolerance from the majority: I do not like you because you did not assimilate, but I have to give you some credence for your cultural strength. It should be clear here that “tolerance” is just what it is—tolerating something does not mean that it is genuinely acceptable, rather, that the dominant can put up with it. Thus, accommodation is never final and does not guarantee ultimate bliss; friction in the future is possible. It could be said that the position of accommodation, though a dream for an ethnic group, represent a precarious that could be significantly disturbed due to unexpected structural changes.

Finally, when cultural perpetuation is coupled with acceptance from the dominant, the outcome would be that of integration. Probably this outcome is rare to occur readily in human life. It is more conceivable that such a status for a minority group would come at a later stage. Such development is likely to be predicated on the intellectual contribution of the minority group, and specifically philosophically-impregnated and culture-related contributions, not simply on contributions at the level of technology and physical sciences. However, it is conceivable that an elite minority takes over the majority in the society; the success of this case would necessarily depend on the accommodating potential of the elite group’s value system and the universality of its outlook. If such rare marvelous qualities existed, they would not automatically put in place a paradise of perfect pluralistic integration. Rather, such outcome is conditioned upon a highly mature political vision and creative pragmatic application.

At this point I would like to remind the reader that the model I theorized is an “ideal type” in the Weberian sense, and no group fits the model neatly. Putting in mind

that there are variations within any one group, the case of African Americans approximated the position of subjugation for a long time, while “white ethnics” approximated the category of assimilation. Latinos today approximate the position of accommodation. With changing circumstances, the position of an ethnic group could change. For example, Native Indians largely moved from the bottom part of the chart to the upper chart, and Asian groups vacillated between the positions of assimilation and accommodation.

It should be noted that assimilation does not prevent from some *cultural preservation*, such as the perpetuation of selected ethnic folkways and customs. The society might even celebrate such type of cultural perpetuation. In a capitalistic system, the market would be keen to capitalize on ethnic peculiarities, customizing services for ethnic members and popularizing their ways as part of expanding the “means of consumption.” In contrast, subjugation is associated with negative evaluation and repulsion of ethnic folkway. Class-culture considerations orient the dominant to avoid symbols that affect social status. Some jealousy from the lower class uninhibited folkways might occur, however, which results in gradual adoption from the majority.

The outcome of accommodation is usually associated with the maintenance of culture at the level of norms. However, since norms are values placeholders, contention over norms are deemed to occur, and the contention could be mild and veiled or sharp and overt. Contention could also lead to conflict, depending on many factors. Conflict is more likely when the new norm points to seemingly opposing value, or a value that does not easily fit in the worldview of the dominant. Thus, we should be reminded that accommodation, as well as assimilation, goes along a degree of marginalization accompanied at times with subtle prejudice and muted hostility.

In the long run, however, maintaining the higher levels of culture (outlooks and values) has the potential for garnering status, respect, and social power. *Cultural maintenance* at the midlevel of norms is specifically advantageous in educational and financial success, in managing poverty, and in battling neighborhood disintegration. *Cultural preservation* at the lower levels folkways can bring curiosity in customs and artistic expressions. Asian groups and Latinos serve as example on the mid-level of

cultural perpetuation. The folklore icons of Black culture successfully penetrated the culture of the nation; yet, black culture still struggles to be accepted as legitimate.

A final word about implied causality is due. I have already noted that the presented model is an ideal type, not an operationalized empirical model.

The evidence in the above discussion necessarily has a quality of generality associated with comparative-historical methods. The language of evidence here is not direct causality expected in statistical models, rather, proximate causes in the Weberian scheme of analysis. Cultural perpetuation could be mistakenly understood as a panacea that singularly works and insures positive outcomes. Obviously, the issue is more complex although the germ idea is valid. It is exactly because the taboo idea of cultural perpetuation is confused and politicized, the charting of the larger contours of the issue was necessary. Cultural perpetuation operates as a nexus of several more specific conditions. Four crucial factors are relevant here: cultural capital, social capital, economic potential, and political power.

Cultural capital points to minority group member's formal education and skills deemed valuable for the host society<sup>1</sup>. Language is also included in cultural capital, whether it is English language mastery or holding a language that is perceived to be either artistic or valuable in accessing knowledge. Religion is also a crucial element of cultural capital in three ways: its framework, its normative glue, its relevance to the horizon of innovation that it endows actors. Cultural capital also encompasses pre-immigration status and class-culture. When the class-culture of minority members is aligned with the culture of modernity, it sets a host of positive integration terms. Evidence on the special challenges to integration that people from rural background face is consistent.

Social capital points to networks available for a minority group, whether they are formal or informal. While formal networks are deemed more compatible with the functioning of modern institutions, informal networks are highly critical especially when the minority lacks in terms the other aforementioned factors. Economic potential is a

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am invoking Bourdieu although I do not share his utilitarianism.

third independent factor that largely shapes the nature of integration of a minority group, and is related to the above two points. We should be reminded that an ethnic enclave is a space in which social capital and cultural capital interact, fostering conditions that enable economic activities.

Lastly, political power is a significant factor that includes a variety of dimensions. The standing of the country of origin associated with the ethnic group has significant importance on the fate of its members. For example, to protect American Japanese from segregation policies, the Japanese government interfered and reached the Gentleman Agreement with the US government. Later the Japanese were considered suspects at the days of Pearl Harbor, but the shift of the stance of Japan from a rival to a successful partner in world capitalism restored prestige to Japanese. Throughout the US history, the Chinese occupied a precarious position, partly mirroring the precarious relationship between the US and China.

Proximity of the country of origin plays a specific role, since it puts in motion a wide range of compulsory, two-way exchanges. The Mexican case is a clear example here, from economic ties and maquiladoras to the control of drug trafficking. That, in turn, translates into tacit political power. Geopolitical factors should also be considered. However, it seems that geopolitics is not divorced from civilizational attachments. For example, American Egyptian, Pakistani, and Saudi Americans belong to countries that are allied to the US, but such belonging allows only for politicking and does not produce political power.

The potential of resistance and contestation is another dimension of political power, and is related to the minority group's size and its concentration. The resistance of African Americans in the past and of Latino today highly hinges on numbers and area<sup>1</sup>. The case of native Indians is specifically instructive in terms of political power since they lacked on all the other dimensions. Native Indians had cultural and economic capitals that were incompatible with modern societies. However, they enjoyed a strong social capital represented in the tribal structure. While the tribal structure of African Americans was

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<sup>1</sup> Consider that President Obama got only 10% of votes in Alabama and Missouri, the bedrock state of historic Black resistance.

dismantled in the process of slavery, it was maintained, to varying degrees, in the case of Natives. Tribal leadership of Natives played a crucial role for more than a hundred year of fierce resistance, along with the advantage of a land with which they were familiar and a self-sufficient economy.

At this point, and based on the experiences of the four non-white American ethnicities (Native Indians, African Americans, early Mexicans, and early Asians) we can formulate the following propositions.

First, forgoing the cultural core seems to have positive effects only for ethnic groups that belong to the same civilizational realm of that of the dominant. White Ethnics serve the known positive evidence this proposition, and the experience of Blacks serves the negative evidence—blacks did lose their cultural core but did not benefit from that. Latinos stand on the opposite side on the dimension, while Asians occupies the middle.

Second, ethnic groups of written languages have larger potential for integration than oral language groups. The experiences of Latinos and Asians provide positive evidence while the experience of Natives and African Americans provide negative evidence.

Third, ethnic groups that are connected to religious scripture (and to World Religions in particular), have the potential of recouping and redefining their stance in the host society, exactly because of the generative capacity of religious texts. The experience of African Americans provides support to the two sides of the argument. Belonging to local religions, early African Americans lacked one source of pan-black reference. The resistance of blacks in later days was largely facilitated by their adopted religion and the churches in which it was housed. Effectively, the adopted religion did not help until noted black leadership developed within its ranks. However, while adopting the religion of the dominant could be seen as the most forceful factor in minority group's accommodation, it did not help African Americans much, partially due to the peculiarity of race in the US and the lack of universality, or the ethno-closure, of white Protestantism. It was the secular elements in the religious black discourse that made a difference, and it was only a short-lived one as it lacked resonance with the average African American.

Fourth, kinship networks have positive impact on economic success and on enhancing internal social control against delinquency. The financial pools that Chinese and other Asians utilize represent known examples. From newer immigrant groups, Kenyan Muslims and Christian Ethiopians use such methods to their advantage, while Nigerians fail. Kinship networks kept delinquency rates low among early non-highly educated Arabs, and helped Chinese to cleanse China Towns from licentiousness.

Fifth, family cohesiveness enhances personal success and mitigates underclass formation. Poverty, per se, does not produce an underclass situation; rather, it is poverty in addition to neighborhood degeneration associated with family system failure. The evidence on that is pronounced among all minority and ethnic groups, despite that the issue is ignored or obscured in academic circles. The prevalence of homelessness among whites and blacks is particularly instructive when contrasted to Latinos. The issue of the black family is clear evidence, and it would not have turned into a controversial issue should it not cast, at times, in a victim blaming manner<sup>1</sup>.

The evidence cited above is overwhelming although it, necessarily, maintains a degree of generality. It is understandable that the situations of different ethnic and minority groups were the result of complex constellation of factors. More nuanced analysis could be done on subgroups and different cases. Such analysis would serve as an in-depth case study, which obviates comparison. As long as the aim is deducing lessons, common trajectories, and empirical uniformities, the universal does not negate exceptions and special cases, and the specific does not cancel the general.

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of children under 18 who live with both parents is 35% among blacks while it is 76% among whites (US Bureau of the Census, 2006, Table C3.). Latinos generally disapprove having out of wedlock children, but the percentage of such births seems to have approximated that of whites (Steven Camarota. Center for Immigration Studies, <http://www.cis.org/articles/2007/back507.html>). However, anecdotal discussions among Latinos suggest that the avoidance of abortion contributes to such high percentage and that such practice is not yet normalized. Historically, slavery practices have contributed to the fragmentation of the black family. However, it is argued that today's black family is stressed by contemporary economic discrimination (Joe Feagin and Karyn D. McKinney. *The Many Costs of Racism*. Rowan and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2003). Furthermore, violence against black males, the hostility of law enforcement agencies toward them that result in 5 fold incarceration rate compared to whites, and the internal predatory behavior against black females are all factors related to the current situation of the black family. (James Q. Wilson. "Slavery and the Black Family." *Public Interest*, Spring 2002). It should be noted that it was blacks, and black women in particular, who defeated California's 2008 proposition for allowing same-sex marriage, where 72% of them voted against it compared to 52% among whites (<http://www.cnn.com/election/2008/results/polls/#CAI01p1>).

The pedestrian wisdom in the U.S. assumes that foregoing “foreign” cultural backgrounds qualifies for success, but the evidence points otherwise. More importantly, such a view assumes that learning the culture of the host society is predicated on forgetting old culture—*assimilation by substitution*. Such view is simplistic because the process of adaptation usually operates along the line of *integration through synthesis*. How well did American Muslims in terms of cultural resilience needs separate detailed discussion.