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Making Sense and Making Selves in a Changing World

We began this book by pointing out that ethnicity and race played a prominent and often sensational role in human affairs in the 20th century and continue to do so in the 21st. This fact, obvious in virtually every part of the world, is part of the perplexing puzzle that ethnicity and race present. As we noted in Chapter 1, it was not what many of those who had given thought to the matter expected. On the contrary, the general expectation was that the great integrative and universalizing forces of modernity would sweep such attachments away. They might be replaced by other group bonds, such as the consciousness of shared class positions and interests, or they might be replaced by an either enlightened or alienated individualism that shunned group identities altogether. But the bonds of ethnicity and race were believed to be residues of the past, their salience and significance rapidly receding in a changing world.

Instead, they proved resilient and resurgent, and it seems likely that they will continue to shape and reflect the world in which we live. But how will they do that and in what forms? What will sustain them as bases of collective identity, and what roles are they likely to play in the future?

The Impact of Modernity

The very processes that were expected to undermine ethnicity and race seem instead to have occasioned their resurgence, restoring them as objects of

conflict, negotiation, assertion, and visible construction. The explanation of this unanticipated outcome has to do in part with the paradoxical character of modernity itself and, in particular, with the complexity of two of its most prominent aspects: globalization and rationalization.

Modernity embraces a set of processes that are “inherently globalising” (Giddens 1990:63). Among these are the following:

- The enormous growth and global reach of the capitalist economy, which increasingly binds diverse and distant places and peoples into massive, inter-connected markets and production systems;
- The global expansion of state power and, in particular, military power, beginning in the modern period with the British Empire, continuing during the U.S.-Soviet superpower rivalry of the Cold War, and now proceeding under American hegemony;
- The development of mass media and communications systems that are global in their reach, through which not only information and ideas but also cultural practices, images, and symbols move across the world with unprecedented speed and penetration.

These processes mean that “local” events are almost never local anymore; what happens in one place is inevitably linked to phenomena happening in another place, or more likely in many other places, some of them half a world away. Some of these links among events are economic or political; some are composed of cultural influences, either dramatic or subtle; some are what we might call “exemplar” effects, in which one group of people interpret their situations or act in particular ways partly because some other group of people, somewhere, have done the same and the ideas or actions of those others resonate with their own lives. These innumerable, multiplying, global interconnections make ever more obsolete an older and never entirely accurate way of thinking and talking about societies as if they were discrete, clearly bounded entities. Human beings can imagine their worlds in many different ways, organizing them conceptually into discrete units, but the discreteness is more and more an illusion. Increasingly, it is the connections that matter (Giddens 1990; Hall, Held, and McGrew 1992; McMichael 2000).

These globalizing processes have tended to operate in a particular direction. The flows of influence have been heavily outward from a predominantly Western and Northern core—the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union in its own imperial heyday, and more recently and to a lesser degree, Japan—toward the rest of the world. The result is ever more dense networks of economic, political, and cultural power linking parts of the world to each other in ways that have been dominated by the West.

That may be changing, particularly as China and India, in the early years of the 21st century, expand their influence in global economic and political relations and as the Islamic countries of the Middle East challenge Western power. But there is more to it than this. Although globalization has linked the various parts of the world together, it has not simply subordinated one half to the other. Peoples of the non-Western world have tended “to organize what is afflicting them in their own cultural terms” (Sahlins 1994:413). They have struggled to make their own histories, identities, and ways of life out of materials both indigenous and foreign, fitting external influences and externally driven events into their own evolving interpretive schemes (see, for compelling historical examples, Bradley 1987 and Sahlins 1985 and 1994). Nonetheless, their efforts have been occasioned by a globalizing process that has been driven largely by Western actions and has carried Western influences far and wide.

One result—and a further dimension—of globalization has been increased migration. Although economic, political, and cultural influences to a large degree have moved outward from a predominantly Western core, people have been heading the other way. In the aftermath of decolonization and in response to these multiplying and increasingly dense connections, growing numbers of people from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Latin America—what is sometimes now called the “global South”—have been migrating toward the core, feeding the burgeoning immigrant populations of the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Migration has been a constant characteristic of the world, but its dimensions have changed radically. The numbers have become enormous; the distances have become global.

Intimately bound up in these globalizing developments has been another aspect of modernity: rationalization. As Max Weber argued a century ago (see Chapter 1), rationality has become increasingly the principle on which modern organizations, relationships, and actions are built—or at least the principle on which they are defended.

The thrust of these developments has been profoundly unsettling for much of the world. Changing economies and social systems increased uncertainty and competition among groups. Decolonization opened up centers of political power to new contestants and to the formerly disfranchised, many of whom shared little more than their previously colonized status. As populations moved, they did not necessarily “melt” together. Instead, they were often thrown into competition with each other as migration challenged long-established advantages and prevailing assumptions. The rising expectations and demands of some groups triggered the resistance of

others. The growing complexity of a more mobile and diverse social life encouraged a search for simplifying categories. Rationalization left some people feeling alienated from the large and impersonal institutions that increasingly dominated their lives. It left others searching for ideological means to justify and maintain their own power and privilege.

Among the things most unsettled in these situations have been collective attachments and affiliations. Globalization has not been uniformly integrative and homogenizing. It has also resuscitated old identities and inspired new ones. Changing interests and the demands of new situations have precipitated a flurry of identity construction and reconstruction, sending ripples across the imaginary relief map of the world's identities and challenging established understandings of "us" and "them."

In these circumstances, ethnicity and race have had a great deal to offer: readily identifiable boundaries on which to stake one's claims; usable bases for collective organization, action, and cultural legitimation; a sense of continuity and permanence in the midst of change; a sense of meaning and of intimate connection and communion—even if only imagined—in a world in which most connections are impersonal and communion is in short supply. They are both simplifying and often profoundly consequential: available and appealing vessels that can be filled with meanings in the face of competition or threat, alienation or uncertainty, dislocation or change. In short, modernity, instead of doing away with ethnicity and race as bases of identity and collective action, invigorated them.

What now? Will the 21st century offer us more of the same? The forces of modernity and globalization are unlikely to abate. Does this mean that ethnicity and race will also maintain their power?

Only time will tell, but as the 20th century recedes and the 21st unfolds, at least two very different trends are apparent. One is the blurring of ethnic and racial boundaries through mixing and multiplicity; the other is the reinforcement of such boundaries and bonds through continuing separation and consolidation. Part of what makes the future of ethnicity and race in this new century difficult to predict is the apparent divergence between these two trends. In the following two sections, we examine each in turn.

Mixing and Multiplicity

In an article on Pacific Islander Americans, Paul Spickard and Rowena Fong (1995) tell a story about an argument between two players in a schoolyard basketball game in Kaneohe, Hawaii:

As basketball players will, they started talking about each other's families. One, who prided himself on his pure Samoan ancestry, said, "You got a Hawaiian grandmother, a Pake [Chinese] grandfather. You other grandfather's Portege [Portuguese], and you mom's Filipino. You got Haole [White] brother-in-law and Korean cousins. Who da heck are you?" The person with the bouquet of ethnic possibilities smiled (his team was winning) and said, simply, "I all da kine [I'm all of those things.] Le's play." (P. 1365)

By drawing attention to the diversity of his opponent's ethnic background, the basketball player in Hawaii was pointing to a well-established aspect not only of Hawaiian life, but of many other parts of the Pacific. Most Pacific Islanders have long recognized and embraced both the idea of being multiethnic and the existence of a community composed of typically multiethnic persons. Multiethnicity was common in much of the Pacific long before Europeans appeared. Various of the peoples of the vast Pacific had developed their own technologies for finding one another on tiny islands in a great, blue ocean; integrating knowledge of stars and currents into orally preserved, instrument-free navigation systems of extraordinary capacity; and maintaining trade and social relations that stretched across thousands of miles of open water (Finney 1994). In time, the scope of Pacific mixing grew. European explorers appeared, followed by European settlers. Colonial administrations brought in workers from India and elsewhere. Eventually, there were Chinese, Japanese, more Europeans, and an assortment of others.

Hawaii was a gathering spot for many of these peoples. By 1900, more than half the population was foreign-born (Pierce 2005). Spickard and Fong note a Hawaiian woman whose five names represent the four ethnicities in her ancestry—Japanese, Māori, Hawaiian, and Samoan—plus a first name that is a family invention. They tell the story of a Hawaiian political activist and lawyer named William Kauaiwiulaokalani Wallace, who begins his public speaking appearances by chanting his genealogy. His ethnic ancestries include Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Tahitian, German, Scottish, and Chinese. He married a Māori woman from New Zealand. It takes time to get through all the details, and he accompanies his own chant by playing his nose flute and drum (Spickard and Fong 1995:1368–69). Many other people of the Pacific, particularly in Hawaii, could describe similar ancestries. Few of them think of themselves as Pacific Islanders, a term used by the U.S. census and government administrators. What supposedly links them in that category is the dominance of Polynesian ancestries, but it is someone else's category, not their own. Many of them tend to focus on only one or two of their multiple ancestries, describing themselves "as Tongans (or Tongan-Americans), Samoans, Fijians, and so on" (Spickard and Fong 1995:1368).

Multiethnicity and multiraciality—mixed ancestry—are ancient phenomena, probably as old as interaction among human peoples. At the same time, the basketball player was pointing to something quite new in the grand sweep of human history. Human movement and mixing have grown enormously in recent centuries. Slavery, colonialism, political upheaval, famine, war, the search for jobs and security—these and other forces have moved people from countryside to city, country to country, and continent to continent in extraordinary numbers, producing a massive redistribution of the world's population in the span of a few centuries and a degree and complexity of mixing unseen before.

Therefore, while it may be more complex than most, the Hawaiian schoolyard player's mixed ancestry is a common feature of modernity. The specifics in his case are embedded in the history of the Hawaiian Islands, both destination and crossroads for a remarkable collection of the world's peoples. But mixed ancestry is by no means a local affair. It is increasingly a global phenomenon.¹

Multiplicity in the United States

Pacific Islanders may celebrate their multiple ancestries, but that has not always and everywhere been the case. Multiethnicity and multiracialism have seldom been acknowledged in some parts of the world, much less celebrated. In Europe and the United States, mixed parentage was long viewed as a handicap. Social science in the early 20th century viewed persons of mixed parentage as psychologically disturbed and socially disruptive, and popular films and literature often portrayed interracial offspring as tortured souls (Spickard 1989, 1992). The refusal to readily accept such persons on their own terms may have given some truth to these views, producing in individuals the very behavior and discontent for which they were blamed.

More recently, psychology has been less at issue than identity and classification. In the United States, for example, the assumption generally has been that whatever the nature of his or her ethnic or racial inheritance, an individual identifies with and carries only a single ethnic or racial identity. Both institutions and informal public dialogues have tended to encourage and even require as much. University applications routinely ask for a single ethnic or racial identifier, and for a long time census forms implicitly encouraged identification with a single ancestry group. Most people acquiesced, accepting ethnic and racial boxes as adequate indicators—for official purposes, at least—of who they are.

That has recently changed. A growing number of Americans who carry more than one ethnic or racial ancestry have become reluctant to choose

among them. They insist, instead, on their own composite identities, presenting themselves in multiethnic or multiracial terms. Rather than subordinating one ancestry to another, many multiethnic individuals not only recognize and accept multiple ethnic ancestries but also either actively assert their multiplicity or construct a single and unique identity that recognizes the mixing that constitutes their perceived heritage. In Chapter 3, we quoted a student whose mother was half Irish and half German, whose father was Chinese by way of Indonesia, but who had been raised as a “regular” American kid and thus saw ethnicity as “a very muddy topic.” He refused to fill in only one box. “No can do.”

Rising rates of interracial and interethnic marriage in the United States are part of the reason for this trend. It also represents resistance on the part of the children of such marriages, or of cohabiting interracial or interethnic couples, to the implicit denial of part of their heritage that the classifications used in official records and in daily interactions typically require. As we noted in Chapters 2 and 6, growing numbers of people are asserting identities that do not fit the usual categories. How long can the American conviction that race represents something fixed or natural or biologically meaningful survive if growing numbers of people keep crossing racial and ethnic boundaries to reproduce? What are the implications for American ideas about race of having children with ancestries as complex as those that appeared in a 1996 article in the *New York Times Magazine*: Pakistani-African American; Colombian-Scottish-Irish; Filipino-Italian-Russian; Finnish-African American; Dutch-Jamaican-Irish-African American-Russian-Jewish; Hungarian-Japanese; Irish-Scottish-Indian (Crouch 1996)? What does this imply for the future of ethnic and racial groups themselves?

This last question has to do not with the disappearance of groups, but with the certainty of classification. Over the last few decades, the United States has passed legislation to remedy past and current discrimination against certain racial and ethnic groups. The implementation of this legislation requires counting individuals by ethnicity and race. As long as the rules of classification were clear, this was not a problem. At one time, the federal government did the classifying. Since the 1960s, it has relied largely on self-identification, although it has generally offered only a limited set of categories from which to choose. As growing numbers of individuals claim multiracial or multiethnic identities and resist the categories they are offered, the classifications themselves are thrown into doubt. Add to this the change in the 2000 U.S. decennial census to allow respondents to claim multiple racial ancestries, and counting by race and ethnicity has become increasingly difficult (Perlmann and Waters 2002). If an African American man marries a Euro-American woman and they have children, what race

are their children? In the past, American society imposed the rule of *hypodescent*—that “one drop” of Black ancestry made children Black. It was less consistent in determining the race of children of White/American Indian or White/Asian marriages (Spickard 1989; M. Waters 1995), although the common practice was to classify such children in the non-White race. But what if several races are involved? As such cases become more complex and multiply, classification itself begins to look arbitrary, and the argument that race has something to do with biology becomes increasingly difficult to defend.

Harvard sociologist Mary Waters (1995) tells a story that underlines the point, drawing on the experience of one of her students. One day, this student—a member of Harvard’s entering undergraduate class—came to see Waters, seeking help with an identity-related issue. The student was from a rural area in the southern United States. Her mother had told her that she was an American Indian but that her Indian ancestry was mixed with Black ancestry. She also knew that she was part Irish and part Scottish. When she applied for admission to various colleges, she checked all the ethnicity and race boxes that applied in her case. Soon after she arrived at Harvard, she began to receive mail from the Black Students Association. She also began to feel pressure from Black students about spending more time with Blacks on campus. She concluded from this that Harvard had classified her as Black.

This student, however, had not come to the university alone. Also at Harvard was her identical twin sister. She, too, had checked all the ethnicity and race boxes that applied, but *she* was receiving mail from the Native American Students Association on campus and was being pressured to attend their meetings. Evidently, Harvard had classified *her* as Indian. Says Waters (1995),

My student wanted two things from me. One, she wanted my aid in navigating the university’s bureaucracy to find out what identity the university thought she was, and how they decided that. Secondly, she wanted to know what sociological principle could justify what she perceived as an absurd situation—she and her identical twin sister having different racial identities. (P. 2)

As Waters points out, this story beautifully captures the socially constructed nature of race and ethnicity. “Here were two genetically identical twins attending the same university and yet assigned to different races, and already feeling some social consequences (in the form of peer pressure and political lobbying by student organizations) because of that classification” (M. Waters 1995:3).

As movement and mixing increase, the disconnection between mixed people and stubbornly unmixed categories—between demographic reality, on one hand, and the ways that some societies, institutions, and people are determined to interpret it, on the other—becomes more and more obvious. It would be a mistake, however, to view such disconnection as a peculiarity of the modern world. Human beings have been mixing forever. What has changed in recent years is not only the scale of that mixing but, more importantly, the insistence on the part of some persons that mixing itself finally be acknowledged—and this presents a direct challenge to the taken-for-grantedness of some societies' ethnic and racial schemas.

Situationality and Simplification

The various components of most multiethnic or multiracial identities are not equally prominent or important at all times. Identity among multiethnic Pacific Islanders in Hawaii, for example, is largely situational. Individuals act on the basis of different identities according to the situations they encounter. "If I'm with my grandmother," says one young woman, "I'm Portuguese. If I'm with some of my aunts on my dad's side I'm Filipino. If I'm hanging around, I'm just local. If I'm on the mainland I'm Hawaiian" (quoted in Spickard and Fong 1995:1370).

This situationality of identity is not peculiar to those with mixed ancestries or parentage. There are other kinds of multiple identities. Some are concentric. They can be thought of as a set of circles, each larger than the last, that move outward from the individual, capturing ever greater numbers of people and describing different encompassing identities. American Indians offer an example. Many Native Americans see themselves both as members of distinct Indian nations—for example, Yakama, Navajo, Oglala Lakota, Cherokee—and as Indians or Native Americans. The rise of a supratribal, American Indian identity, chronicled in Chapter 5, did not correspond to any decline in the prominence of tribal identities. Some individuals may no longer identify with a particular Indian nation, but for most, "supratribalism represents not a replacement but an enlargement of their identity system, a circle beyond tribe in which, also, they think, move, and act" (Cornell 1988:144).

In the Indian case, too, identities are activated—made the basis of relationships and actions—situationally. For example, in interactions with one another, most Indians pay a great deal of attention to tribal identities. When Osage and Navajo meet, they meet not only as Indians but also as Osage and Navajo, and those identities are likely to organize some of their interactions. When they interact with non-Indians, Indian or Native

American identities are much more likely to enter the foreground of both thinking and action. Still others of their identities may arise in other situations: subtribal ones, perhaps, or identity as Americans, activated particularly in other countries or in wartime, or an identity as indigenous peoples linked to other such peoples—Māoris in New Zealand, Australian Aborigines, the Ainu people of Japan, Canada's First Nations, the Inuit of the Arctic, and others. Tribal, Native American, indigenous—each identity may represent a separate set of relationships and carry a separate set of meanings.

Several considerations might drive the activation of one or another identity. One, as in the case of the woman from Hawaii who sees herself as Portuguese in one setting and Filipino in another, is simply the customary way of being with whomever you are with. Another may be the utility of an identity in various situations: Which identity is advantageous in this setting? Although different identities may be activated in different situations, there is also a tendency in the case of multiple identities to simplify. Many of the middle-class White Americans that Mary Waters (1990) studied in San Jose and Philadelphia were of mixed ethnic ancestries, but most tended to favor one or another of them, and many engaged in a kind of "selective forgetting." Waters asked one, whose ancestry was mixed English, French, and Polish but who described himself as of English and French ancestry, why he did not include the Polish part. "I don't know," he said. "I guess I just never think about the Polish" (p. 24). Others chose which of their ancestries to emphasize based on what they knew or had been told about them. Said one,

I was very strongly Italian, because the Irish . . . whenever I was in a bad mood, that was the Irish in me. So I always related the Irish with the bad things and the Italian with all of the good things. (Waters 1990:25)

Pacific Islanders tended to simplify their ethnicities as well, emphasizing one while holding on to the others (Spickard and Fong 1995). One important difference between these people and the middle-class Whites that Waters studied is that the Pacific Islanders in Hawaii tend to be deeply involved in communities where ethnicity remains thick. More than ancestral references, those identities still organize significant portions of their lives.

Boundaries and Centers

These dual processes of movement and mixing raise issues about the nature and meaning of group boundaries. Boundaries, supposedly, are the

things that separate ethnic and racial groups, but they are more clear in some cases than in others. The “one-drop rule,” for example, is in retreat in the United States, legally if not yet culturally. Some boundaries between groups are largely cultural—they are marked in part by cultural practices or shared understandings—and therefore are often difficult to pin down. Among some Native Americans, actions and ideas reveal ethnicity. For some Oglala Lakota, for example, you are truly Oglala only if you engage in certain behaviors or observe certain obligations and share certain understandings of the world. Those things constitute the meaning of being Oglala for those people. Under those circumstances, the boundary between “real” Oglalas and “not-so-real” Oglalas may be contested. Those on either side may disagree on just where to draw the line.

In a society characterized by increasing rates of movement, mixing, and intermarriage and by growing numbers of persons who assert their multiplicity, boundaries become more difficult to maintain. “The boundaries surrounding Pacific Islanders are not very important at all. Pacific Islander Americans have inclusive, not exclusive, ethnic identities. What is important for Pacific Islander American ethnicity is not boundaries but centers: ancestry, family, practice, place” (Spickard and Fong 1995:1378). In other words, what matters is the things people share, rather than the lines that divide them from one another. “If one qualifies for acceptance at the centers of ethnicity, then one is of that ethnic group, no matter to what other ethnic groups one may also belong” (Spickard and Fong 1995:1378).

This does not mean that Hawaii is an ethnic or racial paradise (Pierce 2005). Even among Pacific Islanders, it has its share of ethnic categories, hostilities, and conflicts. It suggests, however, that as populations become more ethnically or racially mixed, there is a possibility that collective identities will become less exclusive, less matters of imposed distinctions and more matters of chosen affiliation, less oriented toward past injuries or abuses and more toward present and future connection and community. In short, perhaps they will have less to do with boundaries and more to do with centers.

Collective identities may also become less important. Sociologist Georg Simmel, in his essay “The Web of Group-Affiliations” (1922/1955), argued that one of the characteristics of modernity is the multiplicity of group affiliations that meet in each individual. He was not referring to ethnicity or race, at least not explicitly. He had in mind the rapid multiplication of occupations, associations, groups, and activities with which individuals are affiliated in the modern world. No two individuals share the same set of affiliations. Part of what distinguishes each individual is the particular set of affiliations that come together in him or her.

In a society where ethnicities and races increasingly mix with each other—which, in the long run, is the pattern of human history—ethnic and racial groups may become insignificant as distinct communities. More and more citizens may be distinguished by the complex combinations of ancestries that meet, uniquely, in each one. Brothers and sisters may share those combinations, but each combination may last only a generation before some other set of ancestries joins in to produce offspring whose lineages are more complicated still. Ethnic and racial boundaries will disappear. In time, even centers may lose their meaning. That, at least, is one scenario.

Separation and Consolidation

There is an alternative scenario, rooted in a different set of developments, that leads in a very different direction. In 1976, a Black American named Alex Haley published a book titled *Roots*, in which he told the story of his own family, tracing his roots back through his mother, through generations in America, through slavery, and, finally, to Africa, ending up at a beginning, of sorts, in Gambia. A decade later, another Black American named Ishmael Reed (1989) pointed out that Blacks in the United States “have a multiethnic heritage.” He was not referring to the mix of African peoples who were brought to North America. He was commenting on Haley’s book. Reed pointed out that “if Alex Haley had traced his father’s bloodline, he would have traveled twelve generations back to, not Gambia, but *Ireland*” (p. 227).

Historian David Hollinger (1995) points out that tracing his father’s bloodline instead of his mother’s was never really an option for Haley, for American social conventions classified Haley as Black, ignoring his Irish heritage or considering it inconsequential. Hollinger calls this “Haley’s Choice” and views it as hardly a choice at all. Haley could choose either the African part of his heritage or the Irish part. If he were to choose the latter, he would be crossing a racial divide, siding with those who had been responsible historically for the oppression of his people and who still refused to recognize the European part of his heritage as truly his. He would be turning his back, in effect, on “the people who most shared his social destiny” (Hollinger 1995:20).

This sort of mixed background is hardly unusual among African Americans, who have been multiracial for generations, commonly carrying African, European, and indigenous North American ancestries. Twenty years after Haley’s examination of his Gambian roots, another African American, Itabari Njeri (1997), acknowledged as much in her study of multiplicity when she wrote, “I am your ordinary, everyday, walking-around

Brooklyn Negro. That is to say, I am African, East Indian, French, English, Arawak, and more I don't know about. In other words, I am a typical New World Black" (p. 1).

Several points emerge from the Haley and Njeri accounts. First, while multiplicity has gained a public spotlight in recent years in North America, it is anything but new. Large numbers of African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos—and more Europeans than often are aware of it—have carried multiple ancestries for generations (Spencer 2004). Second, this very fact reveals the power of existing social constructions. Despite widespread mixing, the United States and other societies have insisted on the presumptions of racial and ethnic categories, for example, recognizing today's children of Black and White parents as multiracial but ignoring the multiraciality that those same parents may have carried. In this dismissal of past mixing, they illustrate "how very easily monoracial blackness is reproduced" (Spencer 2004:364). In other words, as Paul Gilroy (2001) suggests, the contemporary idea of racial or ethnic hybridity presupposes some anterior ethnic or racial purity that is itself an illusion (see also Hutnyk 2005; Parker and Song 2001).

The broader point is that while multiplicity may be one wave of the future, it has been around a long time, and during much of that time, it has simply been ignored, both in North America and elsewhere, trumped by the determination of some peoples and societies to ignore genealogy in favor of certain categorical ways of viewing individuals and the world. The prominence of race and ethnicity in human lives is determined not by patterns of intermarriage or reproduction, but by the categories people recognize and employ in the organization of their lives and the choices they make about who goes in which category.

In short, both past and present teach us that there is another possible wave of the future. It involves the continuing or resurgent power of race and ethnicity in a host of human societies and the separation, conflict, and consolidation that these forms of identification and belonging sometimes produce.

The Limits on Choice and Multiplicity

The middle-class Whites that Mary Waters studied have genuine identity choices. They can engage in selective forgetting or choose to be Italian instead of Irish. As Waters (1990, chap. 7) and Hollinger (1995) both point out, however, many Americans lack that choice in any meaningful way. Being Asian, Latino, Native American, or, most obviously, Black in America is a very different experience from being Italian, Polish, or English.

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It offers fewer options. The only identity choice most non-White Americans face, regardless of their heritage, is a “Haley’s Choice,” for on issues of race in America, assignment generally prevails.

A student of ours brought the point home in an essay on her own identity. She is the daughter of an African American father and a German mother, who met while her father was serving in the U.S. military in Europe. Her parents raised her to value both identities she carries and the very different backgrounds that come together in her. In fact, she claims these identities proudly, seeing herself as both African American and German American. She is the first to admit that those identities are very different. One is largely symbolic, a matter of food and music, the occasional trip back to Europe and the stories her mother tells. The other, in stark contrast, looms large in her life. It does so because the meanings attached to it are elaborate, contentious, and weighted in American society. It does so because that identity carries significant consequences for her own life chances and because it is an identity she cannot easily shed or escape, even if she wanted to. She looks Black, and that effectively organizes much of her life. She asserts both identities, but only one is commonly assigned to her.

In this young woman’s case, even assignment has become complex. The society at large is not the only source of the message that she is really Black. For some of her African American friends, her insistence on being not only African American but also German American challenges their vision of what being African American means. For them, she writes, being Black requires a wholehearted, unwavering, and unmitigated commitment, and they urge her to turn her back on the rest. Thus, there are two sources of the assignment she faces, one on each side of the racial divide: One holds her Blackness against her; the other sees it as all she has to offer. In the tensions of American society, her Germanness has disappeared. She feels the loss.

The United States is not the only country where identity choices may be limited. We have touched on several others in earlier chapters. Centuries of occasional ethnic mixing in Yugoslavia had little effect once the boundary builders went to work, constructing identities with a vengeance—in more ways than one. The invisibility of boundaries in Rwanda did not stop the killing. A rumor that someone had Tutsi blood or that someone else had been seen among Hutus was cause enough to take a life. The fact is that potential boundaries are numerous and ubiquitous. What matters is the decision to establish a boundary in the first place, to find a way of distinguishing “us” from “them,” and the power to make that boundary meaningful in the lives of individuals and societies. Given a decision, a boundary, and power, virtually anything can happen.

The lesson here is that decades of movement and intermingling may provide scant protection against those who decide that certain categories—“real” or not—make the best sense of the world. The impact of mixing and multiplicity is mediated by the stability of human categories, and they, in turn, respond to the logic of identity assertion and assignment. As we suggested in Chapter 4, that logic is variable, from interests to inertia to the need for meaning in a confusing world. Whatever the specific logic, human beings may defy complexity, using ethnic and racial categories to impose simplicity on others’ identities and on their own.

The Unmixing of Peoples

The Yugoslav case we reviewed in Chapter 5 captures this second trend well. It is a trend toward dissimilation, the separation of peoples, and the consolidation of ethnic and racial identities. It is apparent not only in ethnic cleansing and the collapse of Yugoslavia but also in the post-Soviet migration of ethnic Russians from former Soviet Republics back to Russia. It is apparent in the effort by the government of French-speaking Quebec to separate from Canada and in the threat by aboriginal peoples to separate from Quebec (Salée 1995). We can see it in the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Sri Lanka, in anti-Chinese riots in the Solomon Islands, and in the Kurdish quest for autonomy in Turkey and Iraq. It has surfaced in the unfolding disaster of Darfur in the western Sudan and in the anti-immigrant and White supremacy movements in Europe and the United States.

The task for those who promote this “unmixing of peoples” (Brubaker 1995) is to root out ambiguity and multiplicity and to preserve and protect above all else the integrity, rights, and independence of the group. Their rhetoric is the essentialist rhetoric of primordialism, finding ultimate links among persons, if not in blood then in a cultural endowment too deep and fundamental to be ignored or in a historical experience too indelible to ever be forgotten. The unmixing of peoples involves perpetuating or establishing those links—real or imagined—as the bases of human organization, identity, and action.

One of the most interesting aspects of this trend is that much of it is driven by the very peoples who once hoped to throw off ethnic and racial labels in favor of more cosmopolitan citizenship or other forms of group identity. Ethnicity and, in particular, race were once largely the work of the powerful who used them as ways to identify and subordinate peoples and keep them apart. Today, they have become as well the fierce possessions of the offended, the poor, the disconnected, and the powerless. They, too, use ethnicity and race to establish identity and distance but also as bases of a

struggle for recognition and against subordination. Their wholehearted endorsement of those identities and their efforts to claim them as their own suggest that the roots of this trend lie in the continuing disparities in wealth, power, and status among groups and nations, in the insecurities and uncertainties of modernity, and in the simplifying power of ethnic and racial categories. Those categories continue to serve as both refuge and resource in the contemporary world.

Making Sense, Making Selves, Making Others

It is difficult to say which of these trends—mixing and multiplicity, separation and consolidation—will prevail in the 21st century. They are not mutually exclusive. In American society, for example, there has been massive mixing among European groups and some others and more moderate mixing across previously exclusive boundaries. There is also a persistent separation along other boundaries, in particular along the divide that separates Black from White. In some societies, one pattern appears to be ascendant; in some societies, the other. In some parts of the world, as in the United States, both are apparent. There are also societies where ethnicity and race play little role in social life or in individual or collective identities. Which is the more powerful trend? In 20 years, or in 50, which pattern will best describe a changing world?

We pose these questions but cannot fully answer them. It seems unlikely that ethnicity and race will disappear. The factors that promote them as bases of identity and action will continue to have an impact in human affairs. On the other hand, the intermingling of human peoples has become a global phenomenon. It seems equally likely to continue and perhaps to accelerate. The relative fortunes of multiplicity and consolidation will be determined in part by the specific situations in which human beings—mixed and unmixed—find themselves. Perhaps the most reliable prediction is that both trends will prevail in the century ahead, but in different places.

These trends are a study in contrasts. One emphasizes individuals and their commonalities; the other emphasizes groups and their differences. One downplays boundaries; the other is obsessed with them. One celebrates the complexity of identities; the other relentlessly simplifies them.

Despite such differences, these trends have much in common. Both have roots in the global processes that are transforming the world. Both reflect the diverse efforts of human beings to make sense of their lives and the changing world around them or to pursue their interests in the ongoing struggle for the world's scarce riches and resources.

It is also possible that the two will combine, albeit in a distinctive way. It might be argued that the world is moving toward a simplifying kind of separatism: the emergence of a relatively small number of collective identities that cut across the political boundaries of states, building a mosaic of global ethnicities. Like multiethnicity and multiraciality, this scenario involves mixing; like separation, it involves difference. Where it departs from both is in scope and scale. Its defining feature is *diasporas*: globally dispersed populations whose origins lie in a single homeland or set of linked homelands. Perhaps the best-known diasporic population is Jewry, but the extent and diversity of contemporary international migration have given such dispersed but linked populations new prominence. Thus, Black populations in the United States, Canada, Britain, the Caribbean, and Latin America can see themselves as carrying, to some degree, a common identity. They share African roots. They share the historical experiences of slavery or other systematic forms of exploitation or discrimination. They share, historically at least, the experience of migration and adjustment to countries and cultures in no way their own. Increasingly, thanks to the globalizing effects of mass media and the facilitations of communication and transportation technologies, they can share as well a language of identity and a set of symbols and practices that make Blackness—the construction by Black peoples of a common ethnicity—not only a local, but a global phenomenon. For example,

Black Britain defines itself crucially as part of a diaspora. Its unique cultures draw inspiration from those developed by black populations elsewhere. In particular, the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean have become raw materials for creative processes which redefine what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British experience and meanings. (Gilroy 1987:154)

Diasporas have become a common feature of the modern world. Not all will lead to diasporic identities, but some surely will. One of the effects of the growing salience of such identities in some people's lives is to reduce the sense of affiliation to the states in which those diasporic populations reside. Those states become the settings of identities "whose center is elsewhere" (Taylor 1994:63). Such transnational identities are sustained as some migrant populations move back and forth from host to homeland, regularly send part of their wages home to support their families, draw on homeland economic links to support business initiatives, or even participate in homeland politics (see, for example, Itzigsohn 2000; Ogelman 2003; Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002). While it is unclear just how new or extensive this transnationalism

really is (see the discussions in Kivisto 2003, and Portes et al. 2002) or to what degree it is in conflict with assimilation (see, for example, Leichtman 2005), it has never been easier to maintain such links across international borders and thousands of miles. And for still other migrants, the “elsewhere” to which Taylor refers may not be geographical at all, but an imagined core of understandings and experience, a narrative of diaspora itself.

How powerful such transnational or diasporic identities are likely to be in the future is difficult to say. Constructed through global connections, a common rhetoric, and long-distance cultural exchange, they tend to be thinner than ethnicities that are locally made, and they typically are adjuncts to thicker and more localized conceptions of the group. As the Gilroy (1987) quotation on Blacks in Britain suggests, the materials used in constructing identities may draw from far and wide, but their use and interpretation are mediated through local conditions and understandings. With each successive generation, this is more and more the case (Giraud 2004). Comparing the descendants of Indian immigrants to the island states of Mauritius and Trinidad, anthropologist Thomas Eriksen (1992) points out,

Indians in a poly-ethnic society outside of India cannot adequately be viewed simply as Indians. They are Indians in a particular historical and socio-cultural context, and this is an inextricable part of their life—even those aspects of their life which pertain to their very Indianness. (P. 122)

Globalization has precipitated identity construction on an unprecedented scale, altered the conditions under which it occurs, and vastly expanded the repertoires of symbols and ideas available to ethnic and racial groups around the world, but the thickest identities—those that most completely organize daily experiences and agendas—tend to be locally constructed. They are the outcomes of local conditions, needs, interests, experiences, understandings, and relations of power—that is, of the situations groups and persons deal with every day.

Conclusion

The process of identity construction is at times purposeful, at times disinterested, unintentional, or wholly circumstantial. Collective identity may emerge as part of how groups meet their perceived needs and pursue their interests, or it may be part of a gradually assembled view or explanation of the group and the surrounding world. To construct an identity is to construct an account of who “we”—or “they”—are. Behind the ethnic or racial label,

behind the name, there lies a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit story: “We are the people who . . .” or “They are the people who . . .” What follows is a narrative—a selection and arrangement of events and interpretations—that indicates what separates “us” from “them,” that gives significance to that separation, and that attaches a meaning or a value to the resulting category (Cornell 2000). “The problem of identity is the problem of arriving at a life story that makes sense” (McAdams 1985:18). From William Kauaiwiulakalani Wallace chanting his genealogy to the Afrikaners’ celebration of their peoplehood, and from the Hutus’ search for a history they could call their own to Black Americans’ reclaiming of theirs—in these and myriad other cases, human beings variously search out, re-create, discover, and invent life stories that make sense. They do so not only as individuals but also as groups, imagining themselves and—importantly—imagining others, and turning those imaginings into identities. Out of real or imagined events—migration, colonization, struggle, triumph, defeat, survival—they create stories that, in turn, fashion people and relationships. They build narratives that variously assert or justify claims, mobilize compatriots, demonize others, establish worth or meaning, defend interpretations, resolve dilemmas, and undermine or reinforce relations of dominance or subordination. Some do so under conditions of relative freedom; they have the power not only to create narratives about themselves or others but also to distribute them to a wider public and establish them as something more than stories: as fact, wisdom, truth. Others suffer the consequences of the stories told about them or struggle to make their own stories heard at all.

Ethnicity and race are among the idioms through which people compose such tales. People often tell their stories or the stories they fashion about others in ethnic and racial ways, focusing on ethnic or racial aspects of the narrative or using those categories to describe the subjects of the stories and explain the constituent events. In so doing, they both assert that ethnicity or race is important and make claims about what kinds of groups “we” or “they” are.

The idioms of ethnicity and race are unusually powerful. In their implied references to physicality, blood, biology, or descent, they suggest something deeper and more compelling than convenience or utility or a search for meaning. But even their implied primordiality is a construction; it is not part of the world out there, but part of the story we tell about it.

These stories have consequences. Some become justifications for the ways groups treat one another. They are used to explain—or to explain away—discrimination, exclusion, violence, and genocide. Others become foundations of collective resistance, articulating claims and justifying action. Some are stories of inclusion that reach across boundaries and distances,