



# THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF AMERICAN RACE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

CHAPTER

I3



## Current and Future Issues

What will be the future course of race and ethnic relations in American society? As we will see in Part III, in many other multiethnic societies, problems that derive from ethnic divisions and stratification are far more severe. But understanding that other societies may suffer even greater problems should not cause us to lose sight of the profound and unresolved ethnic-related issues that the United States faces early in the twenty-first century, some relatively new, others long-standing. Currently, three encompassing and interrelated issues seem to clearly stand out regarding American race and ethnic relations:

1. *The changing ethnic configuration.* How is the influx of large numbers of new immigrants and the creation of a more pluralistic ethnic mix affecting various social institutions and what impact will these trends have on future interethnic relations?
2. *Assimilation versus pluralism.* Will—and should—the end product of the society's increasingly diverse ethnic mix be some form of assimilation, in which groups become more culturally alike and socially integrated, or some form of pluralism, in which they maintain or perhaps increase their cultural differences and social boundaries?
3. *The continued economic gap and social boundaries between Euro-American and most Asian American groups on the one hand, and African American, Hispanic American, and Native American groups on the other.* How will these divisions be narrowed, and what role will public policies play in addressing them?

## ISSUES OF THE NEWEST IMMIGRATION

As explained in Chapter 5, the large-scale immigration of diverse peoples in the past four decades has had a profound impact on the ethnic flavor of the society. The traditional binary system of American race relations, black versus white, simply no longer applies; the United States is more profoundly multiethnic than at any time in its history. And its future bodes an ever more complex ethnic mix. The newest immigrants and the changes they have sparked have introduced new problems and questions of ethnic relations.

### ECONOMIC ISSUES

The economic impact of the Newest Immigration is widely debated. What effects are these immigrants having on the American economy? Does immigration produce net benefits for the labor force, or does it negatively affect native workers? Do immigrants become self-supporting members of the society, or do they become a drain on public services such as schools and hospitals?

**IMMIGRATION AND THE LABOR FORCE** Whereas some argue that immigrants, particularly the undocumented, constitute an added burden to an already swollen labor pool, others contend that the jobs they typically hold are those that native workers shun—and furthermore, that they create more jobs than they take (Camarota, 2007; Fitz et al., 2013; Kochar, 2006; Meissner, 2010; Peri, 2007). Similarly, some maintain that immigrants overburden the social welfare system, but others hold that they pay in taxes far more than they collect in benefits (Borjas, 1994; Espenshade, 1998; Porter, 2005; Simon, 1991).

The sharpest aspect of the debate concerns the impact of immigration on the jobs and wages of native workers. Some contend that there is a generally negative effect (Borjas, 2004), whereas others have shown that immigration may actually increase the wages of U.S.-born workers (Peri, 2009, 2010; Shierholz, 2010).

There is simply no consensus on either side of this issue. What we do know for certain, however, is that the economic impact of the Newest Immigration is not uniform. Instead, it appears to favor some sectors of the economy and harm others. Most of the immigrants from Mexico (the largest single group) and the Caribbean are unskilled and take their place at the lowest employment levels. They benefit employers in labor-intensive industries, such as clothing manufacturing or other work areas calling for cheap labor; but they depress the job opportunities and wages of native low-status workers with limited education (Borjas, 1998, 2004; Mishel et al., 2009; Smith and Edmonston, 1997; Swain, 2007). Many industries—construction, hotels, restaurants, agriculture, meat- and poultry-processing plants, garment factories—are heavily dependent on such immigrant labor, both legal and undocumented (Schmitt, 2001a).

As we saw in Chapter 5, not all the new immigrants are impoverished and unskilled, however. A large segment of some new groups, particularly Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, and Arabs, are highly trained professionals and managers whose economic impact is far different from that of those who enter with few occupational resources. Many immigrant doctors and nurses, for example, staff U.S. hospitals,

which would find it difficult to operate without them. In fact, 15 percent of U.S. health care workers are foreign-born, including fully one-quarter of all doctors (Singer, 2012). The United States has also lagged in producing engineers and other highly trained scientific workers, especially in information technology fields, and many of the newest immigrants are filling these needs (Martin and Midgley, 2010; Schuck, 2007; Singer, 2012).

Those most profoundly affected by immigration are apt to express strongest support or opposition to its rate and extent. On one side are industrialists and business owners, who ordinarily favor an open-door policy with few restrictions on continued immigration. For them, immigrants serve as a needed workforce that helps to control wages. American-born workers at the other end of the class spectrum, however, see immigration from an entirely different perspective. For them, the new groups—regardless of their real impact—are seen as a threat to jobs and wages (Beck, 1996; Portes and Stepick, 1993; Stepick et al., 2003; Swain, 2007).

**UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRATION** In recent years, unauthorized immigration has come under especially sharp public attack, because it is popularly perceived that illegal immigrants not only take jobs from native workers but put an undue burden on public services, like schools and hospitals, at taxpayers' expense (Kotlowitz, 2007). Because such a large proportion of the estimated twelve million unauthorized immigrants originate in Mexico, this is an issue with particular currency in border states, especially Texas, California, and Arizona, which have large Mexican American populations. Punitive government policies have been enacted over the past two decades in these and other states, seeking to limit public services in education, welfare, and health care to immigrants; most have been subsequently ruled unconstitutional. A particularly harsh measure was enacted in Arizona in 2010 giving state and local police wide discretion in efforts to identify and detain illegal immigrants (Archibold, 2010). Its legality was challenged by officials of the U.S. Department of Justice, and its most onerous parts were subsequently struck down. But strong public support for the Arizona statute further inflamed the debate on illegal immigration and prompted similar measures in other states.

As with legal immigration, the economic impact of unauthorized immigrants is hotly contested, with both sides marshalling evidence to support their position. It is evident that many industries dependent on low-skilled workers, especially in the agricultural and service sectors, could not function as they do without a steady infusion of illegal immigrants. According to some estimates, more than 70 percent of farm workers in the United States are undocumented immigrants (Preston, 2007).

Whereas a majority of Americans view illegal immigration as a serious problem, a majority also believe that these immigrants are doing necessary work that Americans reject (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006c). Some have proposed a guest worker system, which, it is felt, would obviate the need for immigrants, particularly from Mexico, to seek undocumented entrance into the United States. To date, this and other legislative reforms aimed at controlling the flow of illegal immigrants have not been enacted. A majority of Americans seem to agree that those immigrants who have entered illegally should be given a way to stay in the country; the much more divisive issue is whether they should be afforded a path to eventual citizenship (Pew Research Center, 2013a; Polling Report, 2013).

Undocumented immigration, like immigration generally, is driven primarily by the promise of jobs, and the deep and prolonged recession of the late 2000s marked a reduction in the flow of those entering illegally from Mexico and other countries (Passel and Cohn, 2008b, 2010). In fact, by 2011, the net migration flow from Mexico to the United States had stopped and may have actually reversed (Passel et al., 2012). Nonetheless, illegal immigration has become a politically charged issue, and during periods of economic downturn, immigrants become inviting scapegoats.

**IMMIGRATION AND THE FUTURE LABOR FORCE** Regardless of the ongoing debate regarding both legal and undocumented immigrants and their impact on the economy, what is clear is that future labor needs can be met only with a substantial inflow of immigrants. The American workforce is aging; that is, fewer native-born workers are entering the labor market. Therefore, satisfying future labor force needs will depend heavily on immigration. Between 2005 and 2010, about 40 percent of the growth in the U.S. labor force was due to new immigrants, and that demographic pattern is not likely to change in the foreseeable future (Myers et al., 2013; Passel and Cohn, 2008a; Singer, 2012).

The reliance on immigrants to fill jobs in both high-skilled and low-skilled sectors has already become very apparent. Immigrants make up nearly 17 percent of the total U.S. workforce and can be found in every major occupational sector. Table 13.1 shows the percentage of immigrants in particular occupations, all of which are among those that will be the fastest-growing fields in the next decade. Notice that there is demand in jobs that require both high levels of training (medical scientists or computer software engineers) and that require little training (maids or construction workers).

On a related note, a recent study indicated that immigrants are crucial to sustaining social programs that are financed by taxes on wages, like Medicare and Social Security (Zallman et al., 2013). Without their contributions, these programs would be in greater jeopardy than they currently are. Contrary to the beliefs of those who oppose immigration reform, immigrant workers are currently helping to fortify these programs rather than draining them of resources. Harvard Medical School researchers found that in 2009, immigrants (most of them noncitizens) made almost

TABLE 13.1 | IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

Occupation	Percent
Medical scientists	44
Computer software engineers	36
Cooks	40
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	53
Construction laborers	42
Electrical engineers	25
Agricultural workers	47
Physicians and surgeons	25

Source: Singer (2012).

15 percent of contributions to the Medicare program but accounted for less than 8 percent of its expenditures, making for a net surplus of almost \$14 billion. Even illegal workers in some ways make contributions to Social Security and Medicare, which they will not be able to benefit from in the future (Porter, 2005). A high-ranking official of the Social Security Administration estimates that illegal immigrants in 2010 generated about \$12 billion for the Social Security Trust Fund (Tavernise, 2013).

### SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Most current immigrants are highly visible, bringing to American society cultural and physical features distant from those of the white majority. This makes them considerably different from previous immigrants who, though always viewed ethnocentrically by those already present, were nonetheless primarily European. The debate, therefore, concerns whether these new cultural and racial strains can—or should—easily blend with the contemporary American ethnic amalgam.

**THE DEBATE** Some believe that currently high levels of immigration should be continued or made even higher to allow for additional immigrants. Their view is that immigrants not only create economic activity but are a fresh cultural influence on the society. American society is in fact pluralistic, they hold, and should further develop its multicultural character, creating a more equitable society in the process (Isbister, 1996). Others, however, support highly restrictionist measures, maintaining that, economic issues aside, the new immigrants are causing a radical and unprecedented change in the social and cultural makeup of the society, which can only lead to more racial and ethnic conflict. Some see this change as undesirable in itself, suggesting that the United States remain a primarily European-origin country (Brimelow, 1995; Huntington, 2004). The new groups are viewed as unassimilable and thus a continual drag on the society. These issues have a familiar ring, recalling those that raged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with regard to Irish and southern and eastern European immigrants.

The mixed feelings of Americans regarding the social and cultural impact of immigrants are evident in national surveys. In 1993, 55 percent of Americans felt that the increased diversity of immigrants was a threat to American culture. In 2010, the social divide on immigration remained evident, but most apparent now were the different views of Latinos and whites. Whereas 68 percent of Latinos believed that immigration strengthens the United States, only 43 percent of whites felt that way (Murray, 2010).

**LANGUAGE DIVERSITY** Questions and attitudes regarding the social impact of immigrants on American culture have come together most clearly around the issue of language. In Canada, as we will see in Chapter 16, the nucleus of ethnic conflict is the preservation of one group's language. A somewhat similar situation has begun to surface in certain regions of the United States, where large numbers of immigrants, specifically the Spanish-speaking, use their native tongue. Spanish is clearly the leading language in homes where a language other than English is used. Many view the continued use of Spanish by immigrants as offensive and an indication that they do not wish to assimilate. The introduction of Spanish-language signage in public places and the use of bilingual forms by government agencies have created additional resentment.

That these immigrants are able to maintain close links with their origin societies through easy communication and travel and through a constant influx of fellow immigrants from the homeland means that there is no pressing need to quickly relinquish the native language. This makes their situation somewhat different from that of past immigrants. Although the latter also came speaking languages other than English, it was assumed that through the use of English in the school and other institutions, those languages would gradually be abandoned, if not by the first then by the second generation. Today, however, the assumption of language assimilation is being challenged. A greater tolerance of ethnic pluralism has led to efforts to provide public educational and other services in the language of the new groups, especially Spanish. This has created controversy among those who favor or oppose such measures (Baron, 1990; Chavez, 1991; Costantini, 2011; Crawford, 1992; Huntington, 2004; Porter, 1990).

The language issue is particularly acute in cities and states with large immigrant, especially Hispanic, populations where schools must accommodate students whose first language is not English. In New York City, for example, classes are taught not only in Spanish but in Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, Korean, Arabic, Vietnamese, Polish, Bengali, and French. More than 40 percent of the parents of children in the New York school system are not native English speakers (Bosman, 2007). In Miami-Dade County, almost 60 percent of public school students speak a language other than English at home (mostly Spanish), almost 20 percent have limited English proficiency, and many schools at all levels are bilingual institutions (Miami-Dade County, 2006; Nazareno, 2000). The issue is not limited to these high-profile immigrant-receiving cities, however. School districts throughout the United States increasingly must deal to some degree with non-English-speaking children.

Some who oppose greater language diversity have sought to have English legally declared the "official" American language. By the mid-1990s, more than twenty states had passed legislation to that effect, and in recent years a number of municipalities have done the same. Those favoring such legislation argue that it will help to reverse (what they see) as a decline in English language use and force immigrants to more quickly adopt the dominant culture. They advocate strict limits on bilingual education, the elimination of voting ballots in languages other than English, and increased language-proficiency standards for prospective citizens. Supporters of the movement to make English the country's official language maintain that without a common language, new immigrants will resist assimilation, and the United States risks becoming linguistically divided, like Canada (Huntington, 2004). In response, critics of the English-only movement charge that efforts to declare English the official language of the United States are a backlash against the new immigrants and essentially a mask for ethnic antagonism. Moreover, they claim that such legislation is useless because it does nothing to help promote the learning of English (Braverman, 1988; Crawford, 1992).

Although English-only proposals seemed to reach a high point in the 1990s, efforts at the local level continue to appear from time to time. For example, in 2009 in Nashville, Tennessee, a proposed amendment to the city's charter called for the restriction of the use of any language other than English in city affairs; it failed to pass by 57 percent to 43 percent. Any English-only proposals at any level of government, of course, are virtually impossible to enforce and, moreover, are not likely to hold up if tested in the courts.

The issue may be moot in any case because a raft of studies indicate that, as in the past, the children of recent immigrants adopt English as their major language and

gradually drift away from using their native language outside the home (Alba, 2004; Portes, 2002; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Rumbaut et al., 2006; Veltman, 1983). Research among Latinos, as was noted in Chapter 8, shows that first- and second-generation immigrants are usually bilingual, and by the third generation, English has become the primary—and for most, the only—language spoken (Alba, 2005; de la Garza et al., 1992; Latino Coalition, 2003; Pew Hispanic Center, 2002; Rumbaut et al., 2006). In their study of the children of Latino and other immigrants, Portes and Hao (1998) found that knowledge of—and preference for—English is nearly universal among them and they quickly lose fluency in their parents' language. This language shift is shown in Figure 13.1.

Overwhelming evidence indicates that language assimilation, especially among Latinos, is proceeding apace, just as it did for every previous immigrant group in American society. And as we saw in Chapter 8, the vast majority of Latinos believe that citizens and residents of the United States *should* learn English. As Alan Wolfe has described it, “The battle over bilingualism tends to take place over the heads of the immigrants themselves, who in general only want to learn English as fast as they can” (1996:108). Evidence of this is the fact that states offering English-language classes to immigrants cannot keep up with the demand (Santos, 2007). What keeps Spanish alive in the United States, therefore, is not a determination of Latinos to retain their native language but the continuation of large-scale Hispanic immigration.

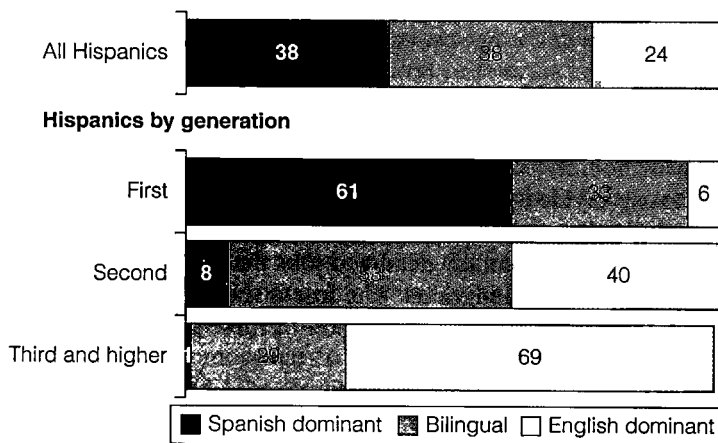


FIGURE 13.1 PRIMARY LANGUAGE AMONG LATINOS, BY GENERATION (PERCENT)

Notes: N=1,220. Language dominance is a composite measure based on self-described assessments of speaking and reading abilities. “Spanish-dominant” persons are more proficient in Spanish than in English, i.e., they speak and read Spanish “very well” or “pretty well” but rate their ability to speak and read English lower. “Bilingual” refers to persons who are proficient in both English and Spanish. “English-dominant” persons are more proficient in English than in Spanish.

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## ISSUES OF IMMIGRANT ADAPTATION AND INTEGRATION

As immigration to the United States reaches epic proportions, it is of no little significance that most of the newest immigrants are from non-European societies. Even more significant is the fact that under the U.S. racial/ethnic classification system, most do not fall into the "white" category. How they will be absorbed into the society and the place they will eventually take in the ethnic hierarchy, therefore, are issues of critical importance that have aroused much public controversy.

**IMMIGRANT CONTEXTS: OLD AND NEW** For several reasons, the typical patterns of adaptation to American society displayed by past immigrants are not likely to be followed in the same way for the newest immigrants. European immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally followed a path of eventual assimilation into the mainstream society, leading to upward mobility, over two or three generations. The newest immigrants may follow a more tortuous route and a less certain outcome of social and economic adaptation. This was referred to in Chapter 4 as *segmented assimilation*. Some may follow the traditional assimilation pattern, but others may retain much of their ethnic cultures and social structures for several generations. Still others may find themselves stuck in a low-income status, with stifling job and educational opportunities that confine them to a condition outside the mainstream society. Because most of the newest immigrants are non-white, they automatically face a racial barrier that European immigrant waves were able to overcome relatively quickly.

Further differentiating the newest immigrants from those of past generations are the significantly changed social and economic circumstances newcomers face today. First, the labor market encountered by the newest immigrants is one in which solid industrial working-class jobs, which in the past provided immigrants with opportunities for upward mobility, have disappeared. What has taken its place is a labor market more clearly divided into two segments—high-status (highly skilled professional and technical jobs) and low-status (unskilled, mostly service sector jobs). The latter are poorly paid and essentially dead-end jobs that have been disproportionately occupied by newly entering immigrants. The fear is that a semipermanent immigrant underclass will be created, impeding integration of these groups into the mainstream society for many generations.

Second, recent immigrants enjoy communication and transportation technologies unimagined by past newcomers. To fly from New York to the Dominican Republic, for example, involves a few hours; in the mid-nineteenth century, it took about five weeks to sail from Britain to America in the best of weather conditions (Van Vugt, 1999). Similarly, immigrants today can remain in constant contact with relatives and friends in the origin country by telephone and Internet. In addition to the ease of communication, the proximity of the origin country enables immigrants to retain links with the ethnic culture and to resist rapid cultural and structural assimilation. Immigrants from Mexico, for example, make frequent trips back and forth across the border, and a similar pattern of movement is common among immigrants from the Caribbean.

Third, immigrant communities in the United States are likely to see a continued flow of newcomers from their origin societies for several decades. This is unlike the earlier European immigrant waves, which for the most part ended in the 1920s. Because they were cut off more completely from their societies of origin, European

immigrants were faced with a greater incentive to assimilate quickly into the mainstream society. Current immigrants and their children, by contrast, are able to continually interact with coethnics, which will likely make for longer-lasting ethnic communities and cultures (Min, 1999).

The mass media, of course, have a way of homogenizing people quickly and with great force. American popular culture is a global phenomenon, and most immigrants have absorbed a good deal of it before they actually migrate. Gans (1999) refers to this as "anticipatory acculturation." Roberto Suro explains that it is impossible to grow up in Latin America, for example, without being saturated with American images and information from birth. As a result, most immigrants can feel quite comfortable with U.S. culture when they arrive, at the same time feeling no need to discard their "Latino sensibilities" (Suro, 1998:71).

Finally, in recent years major institutions in the society, particularly education and the media, have moved toward an acceptance of ethnic pluralism, or multiculturalism, and away from the Anglo-conformity ideology that typified the dominant response to previous immigrant waves. The economy, too, in various ways has begun to cater to the unique needs and tastes of ethnic groups. In short, American institutions have today made it easier to retain one's ethnicity.

**FORCES OF ASSIMILATION** At the same time that the newest immigrants generate unprecedented issues of social and economic adaptation, there are strong indications that they are, in a number of ways, following an assimilation path not radically different from past immigrant groups. As we have seen, language assimilation for both Latinos and Asians is proceeding apace, as are residential integration and interethnic marriage.

Richard Alba has pointed out that assimilation has been incorrectly interpreted by some as a one-way process, in which immigrants surrender their culture and social structure to the dominant society and become carbon copies of the dominant ethnic group (Alba, 1999). In fact, assimilation, as noted in Chapter 4, is a reciprocal process involving a cultural exchange between dominant ethnic groups and immigrant minorities. Immigrants themselves inject change into the receiving society's sociocultural system. As Alba has put it, "[I]mmigrant ethnicity has affected American society as much as American society has affected it" (1999:7). Moreover, a distorted conception of assimilation assumes a homogeneity of American culture that simply does not exist.

"Assimilation," explains Alba, "most often occurs in the form of a series of small shifts that takes place over generations; those undergoing assimilation still carry ethnic markers in a number of ways" (1999:21). Assimilation, in other words, entails a decline of ethnic distinctions, not their absolute disappearance. Thus the remnants of their ethnic cultures and social structures will remain evident, but assimilation will in most regards work for current immigrants as it did for those of past eras, if not as quickly and directly.

That assimilation for America's newest immigrants may be a slower and more tortuous process and that it may not resemble in all ways the assimilation process of the past is clear enough. But recall from Chapter 4 that assimilation is a complex set of variables that includes both cultural and structural components. Moreover, the effects of immigration are often judged on the basis of short-term issues and problems of the immigrants themselves. Those who comprise the immigrant generation should not be confused with their children, the second generation; among the latter,

dramatic gains in language assimilation, socioeconomic incorporation, and citizenship are evident (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Myers and Pitkin, 2010). And, above all, despite the increasing acceptance of a multicultural philosophy and the continued ethnic diversification of the society, there remains among immigrants and their children a solid commitment to the most basic American values (Etzioni, 2004).

### A REVITALIZED NATIVISM?

Public opinion regarding immigration, as was pointed out earlier, is puzzlingly ambivalent: almost as many believe that immigrants strengthen the society as create economic and cultural problems. Anti-immigrant sentiment today is by no means as virulent as in the earlier part of the twentieth century when it eventually led to a halt to the large-scale immigration of southern and eastern European groups. But the racial and ethnic character of the newest immigrants, when combined with fluctuations in the state of the domestic economy, continually threatens to create a revitalized nativism. Moreover, although most Americans recognize the great historical role played by immigration in shaping their society, they do not necessarily see present-day immigration in the same light. This is revealed consistently in national surveys (Gallup Organization, 2001a, 2002, 2005; Jones, 2001; Morales, 2009; Pew Hispanic Center, 2006c; Pew Research Center, 2013a). Today, immigration and its attendant issues are seen by a majority of Americans as a particularly strong source of social conflict in the United States, stronger even than the division between blacks and whites (Morin, 2009).

**SHIFTING PUBLIC VIEWS** As noted earlier, tolerance for immigration seems to rise and fall with changing economic conditions. That is, when the economy is robust and unemployment levels are low, public opinion is less opposed to retaining the present level of immigration. But even during economically stable and prosperous times, only a small percentage favor increasing the level of immigration. Most Americans have preferred either to decrease immigration or to maintain it at its current level (Gallup Organization, 2005; Morales, 2009; Murray, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center, 2006c; Polling Report, 2013; Schuck, 2007).

The flow of international events can also affect public attitudes toward immigration. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, for example, new thinking about immigration issues surfaced quickly. A national debate ensued regarding whether adequate security measures were in place to sift out undesirable immigrants, how illegal immigration could be better controlled, and whether U.S. policy was too lenient toward immigrants generally.

Most of the highly charged controversy that continues to swirl about immigration focuses on the flow of illegal immigration and what to do to better control the country's borders. A corollary issue concerns the status of undocumented immigrants who are already living in the United States. More specifically, however, the focus of the current immigration debate has fallen mainly on those coming from Mexico and, even more specifically, those who are undocumented.

Future changes that are enacted in immigration laws—whatever their content—are unlikely to bring to an end the debate regarding the number and character of immigrants that should be permitted to enter the United States. Those seeking more

stringent limits will continue to argue that immigrants have a negative economic and social influence, whereas those advocating more liberal immigration laws will maintain the opposite. These are hardly new points of debate, however. Historically, the absorption of immigrants has been a persistent theme of American political argument. In one sense, the United States has always been regarded as a "golden door," open to all seeking economic opportunity or political refuge. But the acceptance of new groups has been countered with a tradition of protectionism, which has manifested itself repeatedly in efforts to limit or exclude newcomers. The current public controversy is, therefore, only the latest in a long tradition. As historian Donna Gabaccia has pointed out, "Since the 1960s, celebrations of the United States as a nation of immigrants have encouraged Americans to forget the ferocity of . . . earlier debates about immigration" (2006:3). Those debates, past and present, have been essentially about restriction, that is, how or whether to limit immigration to the United States.

It is important to note that the current public debate in the United States on immigrant issues and the generally skeptical public view of immigration are not without parallel in other societies. An analysis of public opinion regarding immigrants and related issues in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States found that despite these countries' different current and historical immigration policies, a majority of the public in each expressed relatively similar views: they want fewer immigrants admitted, especially immigrants of color; they feel that priority should be given to immigrants with special skills rather than to those seeking family unification; and they believe that their country has done more than its share in accepting refugees (Simon and Lynch, 1999).

## CULTURAL ASSIMILATION OR PLURALISM? COMPETING GOALS

As we have now seen, the ongoing population shift in American society has provoked fundamental economic, political, and cultural issues. But it has also prompted an ideological issue: given America's increasing ethnic diversity, should the end product of interethnic relations be some form of cultural assimilation, in which diverse groups become more alike, or some form of pluralism, in which they maintain or perhaps increase their differences? The questions of whether disparate ethnic groups in American society should move unwaveringly toward eventual assimilation and, concomitantly, whether ethnic policies should be directed toward assimilationist goals, have arisen many times throughout American history. The political and social conditions of the last four decades, however, have given these issues renewed substance and made them especially salient.

### MULTICULTURALISM: THE NEW PLURALISM

In the past, ethnic issues in the United States were generally reduced, by sociologists, policy makers, and laypeople alike, to problems of assimilation (Metzger, 1971). How, it was asked, could diverse peoples achieve a maximum of social integration with a minimum of social travail? Put differently, the direction of ethnic relations was rarely questioned; it was assumed that groups would—and should—move toward some form of assimilation. Today, that assumption is very much in dispute.

In the 1960s, the black civil rights movement, especially its nationalistic phase, gave rise to feelings of pluralism across the entire spectrum of ethnic groups. Heightened collective consciousness among African Americans and black political activism stirred similar movements among Latinos, Asians, American Indians, and even white ethnics. A new ideology of cultural pluralism seemed to materialize in which ethnic differences were not only to be tolerated and respected but perhaps even to be encouraged. In the past five decades, the failure of group boundaries—particularly between whites and blacks—to dissipate, despite higher levels of racial tolerance and the end of blatant forms of discrimination, along with the influx of millions of new immigrants radically different in culture from the European norm, have given added incentive to stronger forms of cultural pluralism. As explained in Chapter 5, this ideology has been referred to in recent years as “multiculturalism.” The turn toward a multicultural alternative represents a fundamental shift in the direction of American ethnic attitudes and ideology.

Multicultural ideas and policies are reflected in almost all major societal institutions, including education, business, government, and the mass media. The impact has been especially great in education, where non-European cultures are increasingly acknowledged in school and university curricula and educational institutions generally conform to the multicultural ideology. The essential objective is to give greater recognition to the contributions of non-European groups in American and global historical development and to study those groups’ literature and art. These efforts have been met with heated debate among educators and public officials. One side views it as an attempt to demean European culture, and in the process to create sharper group divisions; the other side views it as necessary to counterbalance the traditional emphasis on “white” (that is, European) cultural and historical traditions (Goldberg, 1994; Ravitch, 2002; Schlesinger, 1998; Wood, 2003).

Language, as discussed earlier, has been another flash point of ethnic ideological and policy conflict, pitting proponents of bilingualism in education and public communication against those who view language concessions not only as contrary to traditional American principles and practices but as a dangerous opening to a corporate pluralistic system. It is a vivid illustration of the clash of assimilationist and pluralist perspectives.

**A NEW “MELTING POT”?** In a larger sense, this issue may be hollow. Despite the accentuated cultural diversity of the United States, forces are at work that seem to have homogenizing effects on all groups. Mass communication and transportation increasingly break down cultural singularities and compress them into common forms, spiced with only slight ethnic variations. Billboards that in Des Moines picture white people and are written in English may in Detroit feature blacks or in Miami be written in Spanish, but they advertise the same products for all. Moreover, as the society becomes more ethnically varied, cultural and social influences begin to cross in bewildering combinations. Journalist David Rieff describes, for example, the ethnic fusion occurring in contemporary Los Angeles:

Just as the Irish, Poles, Jews and Italians, who had rubbed shoulders and more in the wake of the European immigration of 1900, had, by the 1950s and '60s, begun to intermarry en masse, so the process is beginning to take place among the recent arrivals in

L.A. One can find every sort of nonwhite combination in the city now: Hmong and Salvadoran, Ethiopian and Taiwanese, Mexican and Filipino. (1991:20)

In ethnic cauldrons like California, New York, and South Florida, the mix is so intense that ethnicity itself begins to lose significance. As one Asian Indian entrepreneur put it, "California is so cosmopolitan, you don't have to think about ethnicity here. It just doesn't matter—to anyone" (quoted in Jacoby, 2000:25). These centers of ethnic heterogeneity, of course, do not typify the United States; and the likelihood that such demographic conditions and their attendant attitudes will soon follow in the American heartland is at best long-term. Nonetheless, the seed has been planted.

For generations, American society has demonstrated an unflagging ability to absorb aspects of diverse ethnic cultures, thus revealing the reciprocal nature of the assimilation process. Until recently, however, an essentially White Anglo-Saxon Protestant core could be asserted as the "dominant" or "mainstream" American culture. Given the society's increasingly prevalent multicultural ethos, however, it has become more difficult to clearly define what the dominant or mainstream culture actually comprises.<sup>1</sup> Although ethnic variety has been a basic characteristic of American society almost from its founding, that variety has never been more complex and wide-ranging as it is today. It might be said that the dominant culture itself has, in fact, become a loosely defined blend; the mainstream is, most simply, multicultural.

It is in this sociocultural sense that, ironically, the "melting pot"—an inaccurate metaphor of American ethnic relations in previous generations—may be closer than ever to realization today. Steinberg (1989, 2004) suggests that although pluralist principles have become much stronger in recent years, the fact remains that ethnic differences have been diminishing. Thus, though many extol the need to retain ethnic cultures and encounter declining resistance to their retention from the dominant group, societal trends continue to break down and reprocess those cultural differences. What is being created is a multicultural admixture. Moreover, the insistence by ethnic leaders that ethnic cultures must be preserved does not seem to be shared with the same intensity by immigrants themselves. Contrary to conventional thought, immigrants seem most committed to assimilation, not retention of their ethnic cultures (Saad, 1995).

This homogenized culture is brought home strongly when Americans of any ethnic origin travel to the society of their forebears. Most quickly realize how little they have in common with the people of Ireland, if they are Irish Americans; of Poland, if they are Polish Americans; or of African nations, if they are African Americans. It is in such foreign contexts that a unique "Americanness" is most fully revealed. Despite communication and transportation technologies that make it possible to maintain continual contact with their origin societies, the same acculturative process—thoroughly *multicultural* in content—will likely have a similar effect on the newest immigrants to the United States.

<sup>1</sup> As was noted in Chapter 5, in this new multicultural environment even WASP Americans may be evolving into simply one more ethnic group among many. William Greenbaum may have overstated their declining influence only somewhat when he declared that "after having been the society, the Protestants have been relegated to a place within the society, and increasingly they experience a bewildering sense of themselves as a new minority" (1974:412).

Paradoxically, then, the multicultural ideology that now seems predominant in an increasingly diverse American society may actually be giving rise to a new melting pot. But that does not guarantee for all groups an equitable distribution of economic and political resources. This is the third major contemporary issue of race and ethnic relations in the United States, to which we now turn.

## THE CONTINUING GAP BETWEEN EURO-AMERICANS AND RACIAL-ETHNIC MINORITIES

Let's briefly review the American ethnic hierarchy that was introduced in Chapter 5. Roughly, the hierarchy is divided into three comprehensive tiers: a top tier of white Protestants, essentially the dominant ethnic group; a second, intermediate tier made up of white ethnics of various national origins (mostly Catholics and Jews) and many Asians, for whom ethnicity remains of fading and for some, only symbolic, significance; and a bottom tier, composed of racial-ethnic minorities, for whom ethnicity continues to render great effect in the distribution of societal rewards and in shaping patterns of social interaction (Figure 13.2). The most important division within this hierarchy is between the bottom tier and the other two.

The third tier of groups continues to maintain a collective place at the bottom of the society's economic and political hierarchies. This does not mean that many individuals in each of these groups have not achieved substantial upward mobility, particularly in the past four decades. Indeed, evidence is unmistakable that the resistance of whites to nonwhite economic, political, and social advancement has greatly diminished, and as a result, the economic and political status of large numbers of racial-ethnic minorities has risen significantly. But in looking at their collective status vis-à-vis Euro-Americans and most segments of the Asian American population, members of these groups remain disproportionately among the poor and the powerless. Moreover, the social boundaries separating the third tier of groups from the first and second, though dissolving slowly, remain in place. Members of third-tier groups continue to encounter higher levels of prejudice and discrimination, and they continue to face barriers to full and unbridled participation in many realms of social and economic life.

### COMPENSATORY POLICIES

Efforts to deal with this persistent economic gap and the social distance between majority and minority ethnic groups have, in recent decades, given rise to a number of

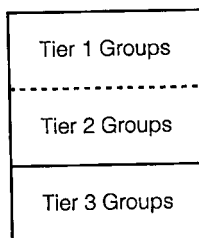


FIGURE 13.2

THE AMERICAN ETHNIC HIERARCHY

contentious public policies, the most prominent of which are those that fall under the rubric of affirmative action.

Out of the atmosphere of the civil rights movement and the new pluralism of the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government undertook sweeping measures to foster political and economic equity among ethnic groups. Specifically, policies were aimed at improving the social standing of African Americans, against whom official discriminatory measures had been historically applied. Other long-term victims of discrimination—Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians—were subsequently brought under the compensatory umbrella and, later, women were added as a target group.

These new public policies, designed as they were to raise group positions, marked a significant departure from the traditionally understood role of government in the area of civil rights. In the past, government's function had been to ensure that everyone was afforded equal opportunities in work and education, regardless of ethnicity. Because this guarantee had been violated for nonwhites, legislation was enacted beginning in the 1960s that was designed to protect members of minority groups from discrimination in schools, workplaces, and other societal institutions. But the question now raised was whether eliminating discriminatory practices alone could counteract the effects of past discrimination. Given the generations of denied opportunities, was it fair to expect African Americans and other racial-ethnic minorities to compete on an equal basis with the white majority? How could these groups ever catch up if they entered the competition burdened by decades of imposed disabilities? President Lyndon Johnson, in proclaiming the government's intention to address this issue, put the matter squarely:

You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a man, who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him to the starting line of the race, saying "you are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. (Johnson, 1965:635)

In response to this dilemma, a series of compensatory measures and programs evolved, generally called **affirmative action**, that were *intended to advance the economic and educational achievement of the minorities that had been most severely and consistently victimized by past discrimination*. That government was now acting to guarantee not simply equality of opportunity but also equality of result evoked a strong public debate, which, almost five decades later, continues to generate much controversy.

As affirmative action policies unfolded in the 1960s, they stipulated that those doing business with the federal government (universities as well as businesses) were required to take steps to increase their minority representation and to establish goals and timetables to meet that objective. The aim was basically to affect minority employment and student admissions. With more widespread and stringent application in the 1970s, affirmative action policies grew increasingly unpopular and created a backlash among majority whites. The arguments on both sides of this issue have not basically changed in the past nearly half century.

## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: THE DEBATE

"AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IS NECESSARY" Proponents of affirmative action have argued that advancing the position of minorities through the use of goals and preferential hiring practices is necessary if the victims of past discrimination are eventually to attain equity with the majority (Kennedy, 1994; Livingston, 1979; W. Taylor, 1995). Even if direct forms of discrimination no longer prevail, they point out, the indirect and institutional forms continue to perpetuate nonwhite disadvantages in the labor market and in higher education. Simply protecting minority individuals against ethnic discrimination, therefore, is inadequate by itself. Hiring workers or admitting students without regard to ethnicity (a "color-blind" process) will automatically preserve the disproportionate representation of whites because they enter the competition with background advantages accumulated over many generations. Artificial incentives for minorities are needed temporarily, therefore, until the opportunity structure is made more truly equitable. Most important, proponents of affirmative action argue that without such policies, there is a risk of returning to a norm of discrimination. "Affirmative action is not a perfect social tool," writes philosopher Tom Beauchamp, "but it is the best tool yet created as a way of preventing a recurrence of the far worse imperfections of our past policies of segregation and exclusion" (2002:216).

Some maintain that the critical importance of affirmative action lies in providing access for minorities to social networks that aid in securing better jobs and educational opportunities. In this view, what is most important is being enmeshed in key networks through which individuals find jobs, meet influential people, and learn bargaining skills. Individuals may possess formal qualifications, but unless they are able to move into the inner circles of the educational and work worlds, their chances of acquiring top jobs are diminished. African Americans have lacked the connections—social capital—ordinarily developed through ties made in universities, in the corporate world, or through intermarriage, that Euro-Americans have availed themselves of more easily. Affirmative action, it is argued, can therefore cast African Americans and other minorities into networks that they otherwise would have little chance of penetrating (Loury, 1998; Patterson, 1997, 1998).

"AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IS UNFAIR" Those who oppose affirmative action or who strongly criticize the way it has been carried out argue that, in effect, these programs have become a kind of reverse discrimination in which *those previously discriminated against are given preference over others merely on the basis of ethnicity* (Glazer, 1975; Hook, 2002; Yates, 1994). Hence, they maintain, the very objective intended—reducing ethnic discrimination—has been undermined, the victims now being Euro-Americans. Government is seen as strengthening, not weakening, racial and ethnic lines of division. The effect of affirmative action in many cases has been to create quotas favoring minorities, a particularly sensitive issue for certain groups, such as Jews, who themselves were the past victims of quotas limiting their entrance into prestigious colleges and professional schools.

Opponents of affirmative action have pointed out that preferential measures shifting emphasis from equality of opportunity to equality of result create aspects of a corporate pluralistic society, where, as explained in Chapter 4, social benefits are distributed on the basis of group membership, not individual merit. Hence, less

qualified minority people may be promoted over better qualified majority people. Moreover, the targeted groups of affirmative action, they argue, are stigmatized because of their special treatment, thus producing negative social and psychological effects on those who are supposedly the beneficiaries of these programs (Sowell, 1990). Some have also suggested that affirmative action programs create a kind of implied inferiority. Whites commonly view blacks as having acquired their positions on the basis of special preference and thus as less than qualified or competent. This not only fuels negative stereotypes by whites, they argue, but also creates self-doubt among blacks and other minorities who are the intended beneficiaries of affirmative action (Heilman, 1996; McWhorter, 2000; Steele, 1991).

In addition to questions of reverse discrimination and effects on employment and educational qualifications, affirmative action programs have been criticized as too sweeping in application and therefore unable to distinguish from among the various targeted minorities those who are truly the past or present victims of discrimination. For instance, although Latinos are covered under the principles of affirmative action, we have seen in Chapter 8 that this broad ethnic category comprises several disparate components, each with different American experiences. Should Cubans, who have not encountered discrimination in work and education, be entitled to the benefits of these programs in the same way as Mexicans in the Southwest, who can invoke a history of discrimination in that region? Or should *any* group whose ancestors came to America as voluntary immigrants be afforded the benefits of affirmative action despite never having been the victims of systemic legal discrimination? Such problems suggest that minority group membership is no longer unambiguous.

Moreover, many have pointed out that the major recipients of the benefits of affirmative action have been middle-class racial and ethnic minorities, not the “truly needy”—that is, those in disadvantaged class positions. Filtering out those truly deserving of compensatory benefits has therefore become more complicated not only between various groups but within them as well.

The issue of affirmative action continues to generate heated debate, with advocates of these programs countering their detractors on various points. As to the lack of qualifications of those employed or admitted through preferential policies, for example, proponents argue that “qualifications” can be variously interpreted, no matter how seemingly objective and valid tests or other sorting mechanisms may seem. Placement tests are often biased in favor of those with a white middle-class background, and in any case they are never wholly adequate in measuring one’s potential on the job or in the classroom. Moreover, merit, they point out, has never really been the sole criterion used in filling occupational and educational positions. On the matter of quotas, it is argued that the objective of affirmative action is to facilitate the entrance of minorities into various institutions, not to keep them out, as was the purpose of earlier discriminatory quotas. Furthermore, they point out, preferential treatment is already given certain groups, such as veterans or athletes, in employment or education. For example, legacy preferences, which give advantages to children of alumni in entrance requirements, are used by most top universities and colleges (Golden, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2010). And, whereas opponents see racial minorities as being stigmatized by affirmative action, defenders argue that their absence in jobs and schools would create an even greater stigma (Kennedy, 1994).

## THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

The legal and political questions of affirmative action programs have involved their scope and intent as well as whether they are racially discriminatory and therefore in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. They have been tested in the courts on numerous occasions since their inception, but judicial decisions have been inconsistent and have not fully clarified these issues.

**MAJOR COURT CASES** In defining the scope of affirmative action, an early case of great significance was *Griggs v. Duke Power*, heard by the Supreme Court in 1971. In that case, the Court extended affirmative action to address instances not only of overt, intentional discrimination but structural discrimination as well. If the number of minorities in a company's workforce, for example, did not reflect the proportion of the minority population in the area where the company was located, that fact might be sufficient to demonstrate the effect of such indirect discrimination or, as the term came to be known, "disparate impact." In 1989 in another ruling, however, the Court weakened the business-necessity requirement and shifted the burden of proof for demonstrating such indirect discrimination from the employer to the applicant (Ezorsky, 1991).

As to whether affirmative action programs are themselves discriminatory, the *Bakke* case is perhaps the most momentous, particularly as affirmative action relates to higher education. Allan Bakke was denied admission to the medical school of the University of California at Davis even though his entrance qualifications exceeded those of minority applicants who had been admitted under a special program. As a means of increasing the number of minority students, sixteen of one hundred places in each entering class had been reserved for minority applicants. Bakke, white, maintained that he had been discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity and sued the university for admission. The case eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court; and in 1978, by a five-to-four decision, the justices ruled in favor of Bakke. Their decision was ambivalent, however, leaving the way open for schools to establish goals for meeting an ethnic balance. In effect, the Court ruled that quotas (which in this case the university was found to have used) were illegal but that the use of race as a criterion of preference was legitimate as long as it was one among many criteria and its purpose was to create a more ethnically balanced student body.

Legal rulings in the 1990s and early 2000s continued to reveal ambivalence on the part of public officials and the courts toward affirmative action policies. Rulings in some cases seemed to uphold the legality of affirmative action, whereas others augured the very opposite trend. Some clarification came in 2003 when the Supreme Court heard two cases regarding affirmative action in undergraduate and law school admissions to the University of Michigan. Not since the *Bakke* case in 1978 had the Court ruled on the use of affirmative action in university admissions, and many believed that the policy's entire legal framework might now be struck down. For undergraduate applicants, the University of Michigan had given an automatic point boost to all minority applicants; the Court rejected this policy. But in the case of the law school it upheld (by a five-to-four vote) the affirmative action policy, using essentially the same rationale as had been used earlier in the *Bakke* decision: the school was justified in using race as one criterion among others as a means of ensuring an

ethnically diverse student body. This case seemed to ensure that affirmative action in some form would continue to influence university admissions policies. In a related case in 2013, the Court again ruled that a university could continue to use affirmative action measures to assure a diverse student body, but only if it had exhausted all other means of doing so.

As affirmative action policies have evolved and been applied during the past fifty years, political and legal debate has crystallized around their legitimacy and fairness. As a result, affirmative action has been a key issue separating liberal and conservative sides of the American political spectrum. Liberals have generally supported such measures while conservatives generally have opposed them or have sought to limit their application.

**PUBLIC OPINION** Public sentiment regarding affirmative action measures has always been ambivalent. Over the years, a majority of Americans have generally supported affirmative action programs that are designed to help minorities gain better jobs and education, but at the same time they have firmly rejected the use of preferential policies or quotas to further those objectives, viewing them as fundamentally unfair and in violation of principles of fairness (Desilver, 2013; Fineman, 1995; Gallup, 2003; Krysan, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2003, 2007, 2009b; Sniderman and Piazza, 1993). In 2013, public opinion regarding affirmative action indicated a waning support. A national survey showed that while 45 percent of Americans felt these measures were still needed to counteract the effects of discrimination, 45 percent no longer felt they were necessary. Support had been on a downward slope since 1991, when 61 percent favored affirmative action (Montenaro, 2013).

There is also a racial divide regarding affirmative action, with blacks and Latinos more inclined to favor preferential measures in work or college admissions. In the above cited poll, for example, six in ten whites opposed affirmative action, while eight in ten blacks and six in ten Hispanics favored it. But to see the issue as a fundamental split between whites and racial minorities—whites oppose affirmative action, racial minorities support it—is too simple. In one national survey, when asked if college applicants should be admitted solely on the basis of merit, even if the result would be fewer minority students being admitted, 75 percent of non-Hispanic whites answered yes; but 59 percent of Hispanics also answered yes, and even a significant percentage of blacks (44 percent) agreed (Moore, 2003). Racial attitudes, then, are not necessarily the critical—much less the only—factor comprising this issue. People may oppose or feel resentment toward affirmative action policies not because they are antiblack or anti-Hispanic or wish to keep things as they are (surely many do oppose them for these reasons) but because they see them as fundamentally in violation of the value of fairness.

**FAIRNESS AND OBJECTIVES** The question of how compensatory measures can be made fairer has been subject to much debate. Some maintain that instead of race or ethnicity, social class should be the major criterion by which people are deemed eligible for compensatory advantages (Kahlenberg, 1996, 2007; Keller, 2013; Michaels, 2006; Schrag, 1995), or that policies should be applied in a “race neutral” fashion (Wilson, 1994). Orlando Patterson (2003) has suggested that in addition to an economic

means test, all immigrants need to be excluded from the policy. Others, however, maintain that such measures bring with them the same kinds of inherent problems as those based primarily on race and ethnicity, that is, issues of determining who should be eligible and how they are to be chosen (Hacker, 1994; Kinsley, 1991).

Another confounding aspect of affirmative action concerns the very objective of such policies. Originally, they were intended to provide a temporary advantage to those racial and ethnic minorities who had been the historic victims of systematic discrimination. As they evolved, however, their purpose was transformed into an effort to create schools and workplaces that resembled proportionately the racial and ethnic makeup of the society, state, or community. The question, then, is whether their purpose is to help bring about greater equity among the society's diverse groups or to create more ethnic diversity within the society's major institutions. Efforts at attaining one of these objectives do not necessarily correspond to attainment of the other.

### THE FUTURE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Whether or not affirmative action is sustained through legal actions in the future, it is unlikely that preferential measures in some form will entirely disappear. Transnational corporations, for example, understand that recruiting more minority managers is simply good business in an increasingly ethnically diverse society as well as a global economy (Glater and Hamilton, 1995). Moreover, they recognize that their future labor force will be far more diverse in race and ethnicity than in the past. Universities, too, have recognized the need for an ethnically diverse campus and have taken steps beyond direct affirmative action programs to assure that. But if compensatory policies in some form are likely to remain in place, continuing political and social pressures make it even more likely that they will be recurrently subject to legal and political debate and public scrutiny. Some states, for example, have put the issue to the ballot. By the late 2000s, voters in eight states had already passed a ban on the use of racial, gender, or national origin affirmative action in college admissions, hiring, and contracting.

Affirmative action, in sum, has proven itself one of the most vexing issues of race and ethnicity in America. Yet, it is important to consider the widespread use of such measures in other multiethnic societies (Parikh, 2001; Sowell, 2004; Teles, 2001). Preferential policies designed to bring about more equity among diverse groups have been adopted in countries as divergent as Australia, Britain, India, Nigeria, Malaysia, and, as we will see in Chapter 15, Brazil. Thus we should not think that the problems revolving around this issue are unique to the United States. As countries everywhere are transformed into multiethnic societies, mitigating the inequitable distribution of societal resources among various ethnic groups has become an inescapable predicament.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The United States, as we have now seen, has for the past few decades been in the midst of a literal transformation of its ethnic system. Several trends have become evident.

- The racial/ethnic configuration of the United States has become more diverse and complex as new elements, primarily Latino and Asian, make up a sizable and growing proportion of the population.
- The traditional binary, black-white, racial division no longer has relevance as these new groups take their place in the society and in the process complicate racial and ethnic categories.
- Increasing diversity and continual ethnic intermixing make traditional racial and ethnic classification schemes less meaningful and employable.
- The cultural dominance of Euro-Americans continues to prevail, but it is subject to new influences that are moving it in a more multicultural direction.
- Ethnic inequality remains tenacious, specifically the division between Euro-Americans and most Asian Americans, on the one hand, and African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, on the other.

Do these social and economic trends portend more contentious and conflictual ethnic relations in the future or might they impel social forces that lead to more equitable and harmonious relations?

### A NEGATIVE VIEW

Public opinion regarding racial and ethnic issues has vacillated during the past several decades. National surveys have revealed both pessimism as well as more positive evaluations of current and future ethnic relations. A more detailed examination of opinion, however, reveals that long-term ethnic relations are not seen the same way by members of each group. In 2006, when asked, for example, if black-white relations “will always be a problem” in American society or that “a solution will eventually be worked out,” a slight majority of blacks (55 percent) answered “always,” whereas almost the same percentage of whites (56 percent) answered that a “solution” would be found. These results were not significantly different from what they had been ten years earlier (Jones, 2006).

Equally important, surveys continue to indicate that whites’ perception of the condition of social and economic life for racial and ethnic minorities is quite different from the view of the minorities themselves. Blacks and Latinos are generally much less positive than whites about the way ethnic minorities are treated in American society (Associated Press, 2012; Jones, 2006; New America Media, 2007). For example, whereas 57 percent of whites feel that there is at least some discrimination against African Americans, 88 percent of blacks feel that way (Doherty, 2013).

Also of concern is an increasingly apparent division among racial-ethnic minorities themselves. A survey of blacks, Latinos, and Asians revealed the persistence of negative stereotypes and a relatively low level of personal interaction between the groups (New America Media, 2007). These schisms are particularly evident where groups are in competition for jobs and education. In parts of the South, for example, where a growing Latino population has begun to challenge African Americans for blue-collar jobs, strained relations between the two groups have intensified (Swarns, 2006).

Resurgent nativism and new forms of racism have also become evident in recent years. The basis of the new nativism is several-fold, but, as explained earlier, its

major source is the changing ethnic composition of American society, driven by continuing immigration from non-European societies. Economic decline, along with increasing public awareness of the country's changing demography, have created fertile ground for opportunistic politicians and commentators to play upon white fears.

The fears of Euro-Americans that they are losing ground to nonwhite ethnic populations have also been inspiration for the appearance among a sizable portion of the population of a new racism, specifically in the form of white resentment. Recall the "group position" theory of prejudice and discrimination described in Chapter 3. When the majority group's position of dominance on the ethnic hierarchy is perceived as threatened, the response is apt to be an increase in anti-minority attitudes and behaviors. Anti-immigrant movements are obvious developments, but fears of displacement by minorities in positions of political and economic power are also likely to be aroused.

In the early twenty-first century, nothing better symbolized an impending change in the U.S. racial/ethnic order than the election of an African American president. In the tumultuous political atmosphere of the time, right-wing opponents of President Obama responded by stoking white resentment, concocting outlandish scenarios of future white disadvantage, and questioning the president's legitimacy and loyalty, often reverting to coarse racist images and slogans. Even his re-election failed to reduce the virulent attacks by political opponents. Moreover, the fact that a self-identified African American occupied the White House did not seem to modify racial attitudes. In fact, a 2012 national survey indicated that a slight majority of Americans expressed prejudice toward blacks, an increase since Obama had first been elected in 2008 (Associated Press, 2012). Further indication of white resentment of progress by racial minorities is found in a 2011 study, which indicated that many whites now see the racial pendulum having swung so far that blacks are now benefiting at their expense, in a kind of zero-sum game (Norton and Sommers, 2011).

Enduring racial attitudes were also brought to the fore by the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black youth walking in a predominantly white neighborhood. What that case revealed was the reality of racial profiling and the continued widespread negative stereotyping among whites of African American males.

Finally, the continuing racial/ethnic gap alluded to earlier, specifically between African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans low on the class hierarchy and the remainder of the population, gives little indication of closing. Moreover, the economic downturn beginning in 2008 took a particularly heavy toll on the jobs, income, and wealth of these already-disadvantaged groups, making their plight even more distressed than in past eras. Indeed, these groups appear to be losing ground economically and, as a result, face the despair of high joblessness and low income for decades (Austin, 2012; Herbert, 2010; McKernan et al., 2013; Weller et al., 2012).

### A POSITIVE VIEW

Given the divergent public views of ethnic relations in general and the even greater split in views of how ethnic minorities fare, it is reasonable to assume that ethnic discord at some level will continue to be a persistent feature of American society well

into the twenty-first century. Still, there is room for at least some cautious optimism. This view is predicated on five points.

First, we should remember that there have been few times in American history when ethnic issues have not been in the forefront of public consciousness and the focus of public policy. We should therefore not think of ours as a unique era. Moreover, Americans, when asked their view on the future of race and ethnic relations, generally respond with more optimism than pessimism (Taylor, 2008).

Second, although the United States' pluralistic trend and the accommodative responses to it by its major institutions are the source of continued public debate, there is indisputable evidence of a growing ethnic tolerance in the society as a whole. A poll conducted in 1964 and again in 1989 asked a national sample of Americans to rank different American ethnic groups. In both years, the rank order of the groups corresponded closely to the social distance hierarchy that emerged from the earlier Bogardus studies of social distance (described in Chapter 3), indicating much continuity in the social standing of American ethnic groups: the groups closest culturally and racially to the dominant group occupied the highest positions. Perhaps equally significant, however, is that the score for almost all groups rose during the intervening twenty-five years. Especially large increases were noticeable for blacks and Asian American groups. Recall as well the demise of crude racist ideas among whites vis-à-vis racial minorities, noted in Chapter 7.

Another indication of positive change in the trend of American ethnic relations can be detected in the response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and afterward. In the weeks and months following the catastrophe, anti-Arab sentiment ran very high, as was described in Chapter 12, and Arab Americans were the targets of verbal and in some cases physical abuse. Public opinion polls, moreover, confirmed the readiness of Americans to subject Arab Americans to special security measures, much in the fashion of racial profiling. In the wake of the society's war atmosphere, Arab Americans' fear of being targets for severe discrimination, comparable to the way German Americans were dealt with during World War I and Japanese Americans during World War II, was well grounded. But unlike the tragic actions of those past cases, government officials as well as media, education, and business leaders made direct and forceful appeals to the American public for tolerance, specifically to disassociate the terrorist acts from Arab Americans and Muslim communities in the United States.

These were not overly successful, however, in reducing anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments among a significant part of the American population and preventing the egregious violation of civil rights in numerous cases. More than a decade following the attack, this remains a troubling aspect of American ethnic relations. Nonetheless, there appears to be a heightened awareness of this issue that to date has contained its potentially explosive nature. As we saw in Chapter 12, anti-Muslim attitudes and actions have been more prolific and violent in European countries than in the United States.

Third, despite what at times seems a hopelessly racially and ethnically divided society, the United States may in fact be more socially and politically cohesive than is usually assumed. Closer analysis reveals that on basic values regarding issues such as teaching a common American heritage and values, there is overwhelming approval by all groups, including immigrants (Etzioni, 1998, 2004). Moreover, ethnic

leaders often convey the view that race or ethnicity is the sole or major determining factor in shaping people's perspectives on social and political issues. But this view ignores more fundamental class differences that, as we discovered in the preceding few chapters, internally divide popularly conceived ethnic and panethnic categories.

Fourth, intermarriage across racial and ethnic lines, as we have seen, continues, with few exceptions, to rise unabated. More than one-fifth of all American adults say that they have a close relative who is married to someone of a different race and one in seven new marriages is interracial or interethnic (Passel et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2006b; Wang, 2012). Moreover, almost all those referred to as "Millennials"—eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds—express support for interracial marriage within their families, a level of acceptance significantly greater than in other generations. As well, a majority of Millennials say that at least some of their friends are racially different from themselves (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Thus the social walls separating racial and ethnic groups continue to crumble, and as they do, the division of the society into conveniently demarcated racial and ethnic categories continues to lose meaning. The United States may be entering a postethnic age in which clearly perceived racial and ethnic groups blend into a "beige continuum" (Kington and Nickers, 2001). "The blurring of major ethno-racial boundaries," writes Richard Alba, "is a plausible prospect for the near future" (2009:225). And, rather than being arbitrarily placed into ethnic pigeonholes, individuals may have much greater latitude in choosing their ethnic affiliations (Hollinger, 1995). It is not unreasonable to assume that the hierarchy that currently defines race and ethnicity in American society will be fundamentally reconceptualized in the next few decades.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, as we will see in the next three chapters, the United States is not alone in its ethnic problems. Indeed, few societies of the contemporary world do not face equally daunting problems stemming from an expanding ethnic diversity and its attendant intergroup conflict. And, as will be revealed, the level of American conflict is relatively mild compared to that of many other ethnically divided societies.

## SUMMARY

- An issue of major importance in U.S. race and ethnic relations concerns the large-scale immigration that has occurred since the mid-1960s. During this period, more immigrants have entered the society than at any time since the classic period of immigration in the early years of the twentieth century. Most important, the vast majority of the current immigrants are non-European, coming mostly from Latin America and Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Some have envisioned a future U.S. racial/ethnic order as simply "nonblack/black." In this scenario, most lighter-skinned and upwardly mobile Latinos and Asians will eventually be absorbed into the "white" category as they assimilate and are redefined as "white," similar to the course followed by southern and eastern Europeans in the early twentieth century (Gans, 2007; Lee and Bean, 2007). Others have suggested that the U.S. racial/ethnic order will come to more closely resemble the Brazilian and Latin American forms (which will be described in Chapter 15), with an intermediate color group defined as neither black nor white (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Bonilla-Silva and Glover, 2006; Frank et al., 2010). Still others see an as yet undefined "middle" of the U.S. racial/ethnic order—Latinos and Asians—not moving inexorably toward either white or black poles (O'Brien, 2008).

- The influx of a new immigrant wave has prompted much social debate regarding its economic impact and the social integration of the immigrants. Proponents of liberal immigration policies argue that immigrants bring many benefits to the society and have a generally positive economic and social impact. Those who advocate more stringent policies contend that immigrants have a negative economic impact and exert a potentially divisive social influence.
- Immigration has been one of the most virulent issues of national politics for the past decade. Americans have seemed to favor more restrictionist measures, though public opinion has vacillated. Political groups at the national level and in states and communities have contested this issue repeatedly.
- A second major racial/ethnic issue concerns the question of whether American society is—or should be—moving toward greater cultural assimilation or pluralism. Unquestionably, the United States today is a more ethnically diverse society than at any time in its history. Moreover, there appears to be greater tolerance for that diversity, with various societal institutions acknowledging and even sanctioning the expression of ethnic differences. Whether in the long term these differences will dissipate or be sustained is not yet clear.
- The third issue of American race and ethnic relations concerns the continuing socioeconomic gap between Euro-Americans and most Asian Americans, and African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. To address this problem, starting in the late 1960s government and other institutions introduced preferential policies aimed at creating greater ethnic equity. During the past five decades, affirmative action has been the subject of much controversy among politicians, scholars, and the general public. An ongoing debate concerns the fairness of these programs and whether they do, in fact, accomplish their ostensible objectives.
- Negative prognoses of the future of race and ethnic relations in the United States stress the continuing economic and social divisions between Euro-Americans and Asian Americans on the one hand and African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans on the other; the failure of most whites to perceive the actual socioeconomic condition of racial/ethnic minorities; resurgent nativism in response to continuing immigration of mostly non-Europeans; and new forms of racism based on white resentment of advances made by racial and ethnic minorities.
- Positive views of the future of race and ethnic relations stress evidence of greater ethnic tolerance in general, particularly among younger generations; greater social and political cohesion than is usually recognized; rising rates of intermarriage; and the gradual fading of ethnic boundaries.

### CRITICAL THINKING

1. If you were to lead a group of foreign students on a cultural tour of the United States, where would you take them to show them the “mainstream” U.S. culture? Or is it no longer possible to define the mainstream in today’s multicultural America?
2. Multiculturalism seems to have become the prevalent ethnic ideology in the United States as taught in schools and universities. What has brought about this change from what in the past had been a predominantly assimilationist ideology, specifically Anglo-conformity?

3. Examine the prevalence of immigrants in particular sectors of the U.S. economy. Then explain how immigration is critical to the society's present and future economic well-being.
4. Some sociologists have suggested that the future racial/ethnic system in the United States will be a two-part one, "black and nonblack." This is different from the more recent model, which is essentially "white and nonwhite." Explain the difference between these two models and how such a change in racial/ethnic classification might emerge.

#### PERSONAL/PRACTICAL APPLICATION

1. In learning a foreign language, students are implicitly exposed to another culture, different in many ways from their own. If you have studied a foreign language, has it affected your views of cultural differences among ethnic groups and your level of ethnic tolerance?
2. In your view, should the purpose of affirmative action or other compensatory policies (based on race, ethnicity, or social class) be to provide more educational and occupational opportunities to members of disadvantaged groups, or to assure greater diversity in schools and the workforce? How would you defend your argument?