

The return of assimilation? Changing perspectives on immigration and its sequels in France, Germany, and the United States

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Abstract

This article argues that the massive differentialist turn of the last third of the twentieth century may have reached its peak, and that one can discern signs of a modest “return of assimilation”. The article presents evidence of this from the domain of public discourse in France, public policy in Germany, and scholarly research in the US. Yet what has “returned” is not the old, analytically discredited and politically disreputable “assimilationist” understanding of assimilation, but a more analytically complex and normatively defensible understanding. The article concludes by specifying the ways in which the concept of assimilation has been transformed.

Keywords: Assimilation; immigration; France; Germany; United States.

The differentialist turn

‘The point about the melting pot’, wrote Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the preface to their influential *Beyond the Melting Pot*, ‘is that it did not happen’. This ‘failure to melt’ thesis was iconoclastic when the book was published in 1963. But it had become widely accepted already by the end of the decade – well before the post-1965 revival of mass immigration began to transform the American urban landscape. By the 1980s, when the effects of the ‘new “new immigration”’ had become unmistakable, earlier conceptions of assimilation seemed to have lost all relevance. When Glazer published *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* in 1997, he was writing as *éminence grise*, not as iconoclastic intellectual.¹ Pluralistic understandings of persisting diversity, once a challenge

to the conventional wisdom, had *become* the conventional wisdom, not only in the US and other classic countries of immigration such as Canada and Australia, but also in much of northern and western Europe.

There is obviously a good deal of truth to this conventional wisdom. Public discourse and public policies bearing on the integration of immigrants are indeed vastly more 'differentialist' – vastly more sensitive to and supportive of 'difference' – today than they were, say, in the period between the two world wars in France or the US, or in the early post-war decades in the US. The 1980s and 90s indeed witnessed an unprecedented efflorescence of differentialist discourse – and differentialist integration policies – in all Western countries of immigration.

This differentialist turn has not been restricted to, or even centred on, the immigration issue. Especially in the US, but in a more limited sense in Western Europe as well, it has been a much broader and more general movement of thought and opinion. It has found expression in movements to preserve or strengthen regional languages and cultures in Europe (Keating 1996); in demands for, and greater recognition of, the autonomy of indigenous peoples in the US, Canada, Australia, Russia, Latin America, and elsewhere (Brøsted *et al.* 1985; Kymlicka 1995); in Black Power, Afrocentrist, and other anti-assimilationist movements involving African-Americans (Howe 1998); in the shift from an individualist, opportunity-oriented, and colour-blind to a collectivist, results-oriented, and colour-conscious interpretation of civil rights legislation in the US (Glazer 1978); in multiculturalist revisions of school and university curricula (Glazer 1997; Nash *et al.* 1997); in gynocentric or 'difference' feminism (Irigaray 1993); in gay pride and other movements based on the public affirmation of alternative sexualities (Johnston 1973); in claims by other putative cultural communities – including, for example, the deaf (Lane 1992) – for autonomy; in generalized opposition to the homogenizing, centralizing claims of the modern nation-state; in anti-foundationalist understandings of the production of knowledge in bounded, historically and socially situated epistemic communities (Hollinger 1997); in other poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques of the allegedly falsely universal premises of Enlightenment thought; and in the shift from an understanding of politics emphasizing the pursuit of putatively universal interests to one emphasizing the recognition of avowedly particularist identities (Young 1990).

Today, however, this massive differentialist turn in social thought, public discourse, and public policy shows signs of having exhausted itself. Differentialist stances have long been a lightning rod for criticism from cultural conservatives (D'Souza 1991) and from the economic, resolutely anti-identitarian left. In recent years, though, criticism has come increasingly 'from within', that is from the 'cultural left' itself, from persons sympathetic to the claims of cultural difference, yet uncomfortable with their absolutization (Gitlin 1995; Hollinger 1995; Brubaker and

Cooper 2000). Opposition to the relativistic, indeed ultimately solipsistic implications of epistemological insiderism; concern over the fragmenting, in certain respects disabling consequences of identity politics; resurgent interest in forms of civic commonality; rethinking of the modalities of and rationale for affirmative action, not only on the part of its long-standing critics on the right, but on the part of its long-standing defenders on the left – these and other developments suggest that, in some respects at least, the maximally differentialist moment may have passed.

In the domain of immigration, too, there are signs that the differentialist tide may have begun to ebb. Instead of a definitive, unidirectional shift from assimilation to multiculturalism, we have begun to see a shift in the opposite direction. To call this the ‘return of assimilation’ is undoubtedly too grand a label for the relatively modest and uneven shift I shall describe; hence the question mark in my title. But it may usefully caution us against overhastily consigning assimilation to the dustbin of history.

Two meanings of ‘assimilation’

What do I mean by the ‘return of assimilation’? I do *not* mean a return to the normative expectations, analytical models, public policies, or informal practices associated with the ideal of Anglo-conformity or the increasingly nativist Americanization movement after World War I (Gleason 1980); or to those associated with the schoolteachers of the French Third Republic, notorious for shaming and humiliating those who spoke languages or dialects other than standard French (Weber 1976, p. 313); or to those associated with the harsh Imperial German effort to ‘Germanize’ its largely Polish-speaking eastern borderlands (Broszat 1972, pp.129–72);² or to any of the many other lamentable instances of harshly homogenizing state projects.

This should go without saying, but assimilation has acquired such a bad name in many American differentialist circles that it has come to be associated, as a kind of automatic reflex, with the narrowest understanding of Anglo-conformity or the worst excesses of Americanization campaigns. In Germany, if anything, the word ‘assimilation’ has been even more strongly ‘contaminated’ and disqualified by its association with forcible Germanization. In France, by contrast, the word itself was never so thoroughly discredited. But in France, too, it was tainted by association with the sometimes brutally homogenizing aspirations and practices of Jacobin Republicanism.

So what are we talking about when we talk about ‘assimilation’? What is it that is ‘returning’, if it is not these normatively and analytically discredited models? To address this question, we must distinguish between two basic meanings of ‘assimilation’. One is general and abstract; the

other is specific and organic. The two meanings are related, but they differ sharply in their affective overtones, moral and political connotations, and intellectual respectability.

In the general and abstract sense, the core meaning is increasing similarity or likeness. Not identity, but similarity. To assimilate means to *become* similar (when the word is used *intransitively*) or to *make* similar or *treat* as similar (when it is used *transitively*). Assimilation is thus the process of becoming similar, or of making similar or treating as similar.

In the specific and organic sense, the root meaning is transitive. To assimilate something is to 'convert [it] into a substance of its own nature, as the bodily organs convert food into blood, and thence into animal tissue . . . to absorb into the system, {to} incorporate' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Assimilation in this sense implies complete absorption.

In the general, abstract sense, the accent is on the process, not on some final state, and assimilation is a matter of degree. Assimilation designates a *direction of change*, not a particular *degree of similarity*. In the specific, organic sense, by contrast, the accent is on the end state, and assimilation is a matter of either/or, not of degree.

It is the connotations chiefly of this organic meaning, with its biological metaphor of incorporation, that have discredited the term, making it seem normatively retrograde (given our contemporary appreciation of 'difference' and diversity), analytically disreputable (given its superannuated organismic understanding of society), and empirically wrong (with its implication of complete absorption).

In addition, one aspect of the general, abstract meaning has stood out as normatively and analytically problematic. This is the *transitive* use of 'assimilate' to mean 'make similar', which suggests state policies and programmes of 'forced assimilation', or at least policies and programmes that seek to assimilate people against their will. Such policies and programmes have rightly come to be seen as morally and politically repugnant. Abundant historical and comparative evidence, moreover, suggests that they rarely work, and that they are indeed more likely to strengthen than to erode differences, by provoking a reactive mobilization against such assimilatory pressures. Analytically, we may have good reason to speak of assimilationist *policies*; but such policies need not have assimilationist *outcomes*.³

Yet when used *intransitively* in the general, abstract sense of becoming similar – becoming similar *in certain respects*, that obviously have to be specified – assimilation does *not* seem to be morally objectionable, analytically useless, or empirically wrong as a conceptual instrument for studying populations of immigrant origin. Indeed, the use of *some* such notion – if only to pose certain questions about patterns of 'integration', 'adaptation' or 'incorporation', terms that have been preferred to 'assimilation' in many recent discussions⁴ – would seem to be analytically indispensable. I return to this point in the conclusion. Here I simply

wish to underscore that it is this intransitive understanding of 'assimilation', this normative and analytical concern with the nature and extent of emerging similarities in particular domains between populations of immigration origin and 'host' populations, that I see 'returning' in recent years.

Three cases

The trend that concerns me has been much stronger in France than in Germany, with the US somewhere in between. This might lead one to think that the 'return of assimilation' is simply an artefact of the cases I have chosen, which include the US, historically the paradigmatic country of immigrant assimilation, and France, the European country with the longest, strongest, and most ideologically elaborated tradition of assimilation. There is something to this: had I chosen different cases – for example, the UK, Sweden, The Netherlands and Germany – the trend would have been less clear-cut.

Yet the trend cannot be dismissed out of hand as an artefact of the cases selected for discussion here. In the first place, the return of assimilation in France and the US involves a marked *return*, not simply the persistence of something always present. I want to stress this reactive moment of return, and to situate it in the context of a preceding 'differentialist' turn in both France and the US. Moreover, there has been a modest assimilationist turn not only in Germany (which I discuss below) but also in The Netherlands (Koopmans and Statham 2000; Thränhardt 2000) and Sweden (Soinin 1999, pp. 689–91), two other countries with relatively 'differentialist' incorporation regimes. Over the longer term, as a third generation of immigrant origin emerges, it is likely that a concern with at least some dimensions of assimilation will become increasingly salient throughout Europe.

I obviously cannot give here a comprehensive account of processes of – or ideas about – immigrant integration in France, Germany and the US, let alone the other countries I have mentioned. Instead, I shall briefly sketch three illustrative vignettes, drawn from different countries and from different domains. I discuss the return of assimilation in *public discourse* in France, in *public policy* in Germany, and in *scholarly research* in the US.

France: from *droit à la différence* to *droit à la ressemblance*

One might think there was not much of a story to be told about France. Why talk of a return of assimilation in a country that has long been the paradigmatic exemplar of assimilation, transforming peasants – and immigrants – into Frenchmen, in what Gérard Noiriel has called *le creuset français*, the French melting pot (Weber 1976, Noiriel 1988)? But to frame

the issue in this way – to focus only on the Jacobin-Republican assimilationist tradition, or assimilationist myth – is to forget the strong *differentialist* turn that occurred in French public discussion of immigration and other issues in the 1970s and early 1980s, precisely in reaction *against* the Jacobin and assimilationist tradition. Indeed differentialist discourse received one of its sharpest and most lapidary, if ambiguous, formulations in the characteristic French slogan of those years: the *droit à la différence*. True, the differentialist turn was much stronger in rhetoric than in reality: differentialism remained largely symbolic (Schnapper 1992, p. 119) and was embedded only relatively weakly in policies and institutionalized practices – for example, in the programme in which foreign instructors, selected and paid by foreign governments, as a result of bilateral agreements concluded with the French state, were recruited to offer instruction in so-called ‘languages and cultures of origin’ in French public schools, indeed during regular school hours (Boyzon-Fradet 1992, pp. 155ff).⁵ But at the level of public discussion, differentialism was clearly ascendant, indeed triumphant during the early years of the Socialist government in France in the early 1980s.⁶

It is important to note that differentialism was gaining ground on the French right as well as the left. The historian and philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff has analysed the rise of a differentialist – one could even say multiculturalist – ‘new right’ in France in the 1970s and 1980s, clustered around the enigmatic figure of Alain de Benoist. No longer xenophobic but formally ‘heterophile’, antiracist, and egalitarian, the new differentialists of the right emphasized, indeed absolutized, cultural difference, seeking to ‘preserve at any price collective identities, and thus differences between communities, haunted by the danger of their destruction through mixing, physical and cultural’ (Taguieff 1994, 66–67).

What happened to the ascendant differentialism? In two words: Le Pen. Although Le Pen and the intellectuals associated with him actually belonged to a different segment of the right than the small circle of principled differentialists analysed by Taguieff, they too adopted a differentialist idiom, adroitly turning it to their own purposes. *Droit à la différence? Mais oui, bien sûr, chez vous*. But here, in France – so went the argument – it’s we, the ‘real’ French, who have our own right to be different, our own right to preserve our own ‘identity’ from unwanted admixture. As a result, the moral and political ambiguity, and the exclusionary potential, of culturalist differentialism were brought into sharp focus – indeed, much sharper focus in France than elsewhere.

It was this political and ideological conjuncture that set the stage for the return of assimilation. The much-vaunted slogan of the *droit à la différence* disappeared with astonishing rapidity. By the late 1980s, it was scarcely to be heard. One was more likely to hear of the *droit à la ressemblance*, to which Harlem Désir himself appealed in a widely watched TV

appearance in 1987 – or of the *droit à l'indifférence*, in effect the right to be treated like everyone else. In the wake of the differentialist collapse, there was a resurgence of neo-republican, neo-universalist, and at least hesitatingly neo-assimilationist discourse, elaborated by such public intellectuals as Alain Finkielkraut (1987), Taguieff (1996), and especially Emmanuël Todd (1994). Their views do not go unchallenged, of course; there are sophisticated voices such as Michel Wieviorka (1996) who continue to defend a moderately differentialist position; but on the whole, the sudden and virtually complete collapse of simplistic, sloganeering differentialism and the equally sudden resurgence of universalist, assimilationist discourse about immigration is striking. Certainly, no equally sharp shift in the centre of gravity of public discourse has occurred elsewhere.

Germany: rethinking institutionalized separateness

While my French vignette concerned public discourse, my German story is about public policy. German policy vis-à-vis immigrants and their descendants has been strongly differentialist – much more so than French policy even during the years of ascendant differentialist rhetoric in France.⁷

Consider three indicators of differentialist policy in Germany. First, instruction in languages and cultures of origin has been much more widespread in Germany than in France, and indeed has been part of the obligatory curriculum in some *Länder* (Castles *et al.* 1984, p. 175). (Since education is the responsibility of the individual *Länder*, this has varied a good deal from state to state; Bavaria, in particular, was long notorious for educating foreigners in segregated, homeland-oriented classes.)

Second, there is the peculiar German system of social service provision to populations of immigrant origin. Responsibility for such provision was farmed out by the state to the three major non-state charitable organizations – one affiliated with the Catholic Church, a second with the Evangelical Church, the third with the Social Democratic Party. Jurisdiction was apportioned in such a way that foreigners were allocated to a particular charitable organization on the basis of their national origin, so that all Turks were the responsibility of one organization, all Italians of a second, and so on. As critics have observed (Puskeppeleit and Thränhardt 1990; cf. Ålund and Schierup 1991 on the somewhat similar Swedish case), this system not only treats immigrants as passive clients of the charitable organizations, but also tends to reinforce and perpetuate national origin distinctions.

The third policy I want to discuss is citizenship. Until its recent liberalization, German citizenship law was well known for its restrictiveness vis-à-vis non-German immigrants. What was and remains less well known is that except for political rights, long-settled non-citizen immigrants have

possessed rights virtually identical to those of German citizens. Of course, as immigrant populations became more settled, and as a second- and an incipient third-generation population developed, the lack of political rights became increasingly anomalous. What was distinctive about the response to this anomaly, and indicative of deep-rooted German differentialism, was that the solution was long seen on the left not in terms of incorporating immigrants and their descendants as full citizens, but rather in terms of extending even political rights – along with social, civil, and economic rights – to resident foreigners. Until the early 1990s, there was little interest in the anomalous formal citizenship status of immigrants, but there was considerable interest in extending voting rights to foreigners in local elections, and a large literature addressing this possibility. This was seen as the ‘progressive’ solution – one that would extend the substantive rights of citizenship to immigrants without questioning their ‘differentness’, their foreignness, their otherness.⁸

Policies in these three domains – schools, social services, and citizenship – and the idioms in which they were rationalized and justified were indicative of a kind of benevolent, paternalistic, and egalitarian (or pseudo-egalitarian) *apartheid*, an institutionalized separateness, suggested in the oxymoronic phrase ‘unsere ausländische Mitbürger’ – ‘our foreign fellow citizens’ – that has been a leitmotif of well-meaning public discussions of what continues to be called *Ausländerpolitik* – politics or policies regarding foreigners – in Germany. Left differentialists, of course, criticized existing policies on various counts; but they too endorsed this separate-but-equal logic.

It is against this background of deep differentialism that signs of a modest ‘assimilationist turn’ can be discerned in the manner in which citizenship has been legally redefined and politically reconceived in recent years (Joppke 1999, pp. 202–208). Naturalization rules were substantially eased in the early 1990s, and naturalization rates of Turks – extraordinarily low until the late 1980s – have soared. In 1999, naturalization rules were further liberalized. More importantly, the rules for the attribution of citizenship at birth were changed as well, supplementing the previously exclusively descent-based law, founded on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, with the territorial principle of *jus soli* (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 1999). Henceforth, citizenship will be attributed at birth to children born in Germany to foreign parents, one of whom has resided legally in Germany for at least eight years. This citizenship will, however, be provisional; in most cases, the child will have to choose either the German or the foreign citizenship at maturity, and renounce the other.

The legal changes, increasing naturalization rates, and new ways of thinking and talking about citizenship on the part of Germans and foreigners alike are indicative of a limited but significant ‘assimilationist turn’. *Not* in the sense that full assimilation is required as a prerequisite for citizenship. On the contrary: the liberalization of naturalization law

broke expressly with this principle, previously enshrined in the regulations governing naturalization. The new practices, policies, and discourses surrounding citizenship are assimilationist, rather, in the sense of politically recognizing, legally constituting, and symbolically emphasizing *commonality* rather than difference. Assimilation, it is worth remembering, means becoming similar, or treating as similar, and this new inflection in the policies and practices of citizenship in the 1990s has involved a modest but significant assimilationist turn in both senses.

The US: assimilation without ‘assimilationism’

Having discussed public discourse in France and public policy in Germany, I turn to a third domain in which one can discern a return of assimilation in recent years: scholarly research. Here I shall focus on the United States, though I should note that in France, too, researchers have shown a renewed interest in assimilation (Todd 1994; Tribalat 1996). In Germany, by contrast, most scholarly research on immigrant integration continues scrupulously to avoid at least the *term* assimilation, even when it addresses questions that could be seen as falling under this rubric (exceptions include Esser 1980 and Nauck *et al.* 1997).

In the United States, research on immigrant integration was dominated from its beginnings in the 1920s through the mid-1960s by assimilationist perspectives of one kind or another. Then, from about 1965 to 1985, largely under the impact of external events, the historical and sociological literature – at least the more theoretically ambitious strands of that literature – was characterized mainly by pluralist perspectives, emphasizing and documenting ethnic persistence in a variety of ways.⁹ Since about 1985, however, one can discern a renewed theoretical concern with assimilation in the scholarly literature (see, for example, Gans 1992; Glazer 1993; Portes and Zhou 1993; Morawska 1994; Barkan 1995; Kazal 1995; Alba and Nee 1997; Rumbaut 1997; Alba 1999).

The ethnic persistence literature has made and continues to make valuable contributions. But ‘a way of seeing’, as Kenneth Burke observed, ‘is also a way of not seeing’ (Burke 1954, p. 40). Focusing on ethnic communities, on ethnically marked places or ethnic organizations rather than on persons or wider social processes, this literature has missed those who moved *out of* such ethnically marked places, who ‘disappeared’, as Ewa Morawska put it (1994, p. 83). With its ‘unexamined assumptions that cultural maintenance is always a good thing, that immigrants as a rule tried to preserve as much of their traditional culture as possible, {and} that ethnocentric Anglo-America equally reflexively resisted both cultural transplantations and assimilation’, it has

tended to take ethnic communities – places – as opposed to individually experienced adaptation – immigrant lifecourses – as its object of

inquiry, and . . . has tended to focus precisely on those kinds of places – areas of concentrated first-generation settlement – where the odds of finding evidence for ethnic maintenance are greatest. It has sought to restore agency to the immigrant actor, but has not always followed that agency into all the varied paths that it could take. In particular, . . . by confining its focus to ethnic maintenance it neglects to extend its concern for the immigrant as historical actor to the assessment of the immigrant's impact upon society as a whole. We have constructed an oppositional history of virtuous, autonomous, ethnic outsiders interacting minimally with others except in the workplace, outsiders who thereby bear, to be sure, little moral responsibility for the sins of the broader nation, but also, by implication, little significance in its broader history (Conzen 1996, p. 21).

Inwardly focused, the ethnic persistence literature has neglected wider social and cultural processes such as the formation of transethnic (but often racially closed) working-class communities in the early part of the century (Kazal 1995); the spatial dispersion that has accompanied post-World War II suburbanization, in which even recent immigrants have been participating (Alba and Nee 1997, pp. 836–7, 857–62); increasing rates of ethnic intermarriage (Spickard 1989; Qian 1997; Alba 1999); and the dynamic renegotiation of ethnic and racial categories and identifications (Rödiger 1991, Ignatiev 1995, Perlman and Waldinger 1997). All of these processes have led to the blurring or shifting of some ethnic boundaries (Zolberg and Long 1999) in ways that undermine stable ethnic enclosures (Hollinger 1999).

The new theorists of assimilation do not simply replicate the old, pre-1965 approaches. The older work – even work as sophisticated as Gordon's – was analytically and normatively Anglo-conformist. It posited, endorsed, and expected assimilation towards an unproblematically conceived white Protestant 'core culture'. Recent work on assimilation, by contrast, is agnostic about its directions, degrees, and modalities, and ambivalent about its desirability. There is nothing today comparable to the complacent empirical and normative expectancies of mid-century. Of course, this is partly because the notion of a universally acknowledged 'core culture' has lost all its plausibility since the late 1960s. This, in turn, has raised the question of the reference population towards which assimilation is said to occur. Characteristic of the newer literature on assimilation is its willingness to consider multiple reference populations and correspondingly segmented forms of assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters 1994; Zhou 1997; Neckerman *et al.* 1999).¹⁰ It is no longer true that assimilation (or integration, a term that often, especially in the European context, refers to much the same thing) is 'inevitably' conceptualized as occurring 'into one, single, indivisible (national) "state", and one, simple, unitary (national) "society"' (Favell 2000).

Today, concern with assimilation is not necessarily 'assimilationist'. It implies no global belief in the inevitability or desirability of assimilation. This does not mean that the newer literature on assimilation has no normative thrust. Normative concerns about civic commonality do underlie and inform much work on assimilation today (Alba 1999). But they do not entail any blanket endorsement of assimilation. Some forms of assimilation are indeed widely thought to be desirable. One aspect of linguistic assimilation, for example – the intergenerational acquisition of English at levels sufficient to permit success in schooling, occupational mobility, and full participation in public life – is clearly desirable. But note that this in no way entails the desirability of what Portes and Rumbaut (1990, pp. 209–21) call 'subtractive' linguistic assimilation – the intergenerational loss of competence in the language of origin.

Some aspects of socio-economic assimilation are also clearly desirable (Hirschman 1983, pp. 403ff; Alba and Nee 1997). Consider, for example, a population with mean income and education levels well below the respective means for the population at large. Surely, assimilation in these domains – in the sense of a shift in the direction of convergence with the income and educational distributions of the wider society – would be desirable for this population, and it is important to know whether and to what extent it is occurring. But the desirability of assimilation in these respects does not imply its desirability in other respects. It does not imply the desirability of complete acculturation, for example; or of full 'identificational assimilation' (the 'development of a sense of peoplehood based *exclusively* on the host society' {Gordon 1964, p. 71, emphasis added}); or of spatial assimilation through suburbanization and the concomitant decline of ethnic neighbourhoods; or of full occupational assimilation and the concomitant decline of ethnic niches, enclaves, and professional specializations; or of the erosion of group boundaries through high rates of intermarriage or what Gordon called structural assimilation (participation in the 'social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society at the primary group level' {Gordon 1964, p. 80}). My point is not that assimilation in these respects is necessarily undesirable, though evidence – for example, about better health outcomes of infants born to immigrant than to US-born mothers, even after controlling for ethnicity and a variety of socio-economic factors (Rumbaut 1997) – suggests that certain forms of assimilation may indeed be undesirable. This point is forcefully developed in the segmented assimilation literature, which argues that socio-economic success, for second-generation immigrants in predominantly minority inter-city neighbourhoods, may depend on resisting assimilation to the surrounding youth milieu, with its adversarial stance towards mainstream culture (Portes and Zhou 1993, Zhou 1997). The broader point is that one can study assimilation in its various domains and directions without being an 'assimilationist'; one may be agnostic about its destinations and ambivalent or even sceptical about its desirability.

Assimilation is not a single process of the sort envisaged by 'straight-line' accounts. Already by Gordon's time, a picture had emerged of assimilation as a complex and only partially interlocking set of processes (see also Yinger 1981). Some of these (notably structural assimilation on Gordon's account and spatial assimilation on some recent accounts {Massey and Denton 1993, pp. 149ff.}) bear significantly on processes in other domains by shaping opportunity structures and contact probabilities. But other domains are at most loosely coupled with one another. Recent accounts are sensitive to the possibilities of different rhythms and trajectories of assimilation – or dissimilation – in different domains (Banton 1983, pp. 144–6). On current understandings, assimilation is always domain-specific and relative to a particular reference population; and the normative stance one takes towards it will also depend on the particular domain and reference population.

Conclusion: a concept transformed

In all three countries, what I have called 'the return of assimilation' has involved a subtle but significant change in perspective. Analytically, this has involved a shift from an overwhelming focus on persisting difference – and on the mechanisms through which such cultural maintenance occurs – to a broader focus that encompasses emerging commonalities as well. Normatively, it has involved a shift from the automatic valorization of cultural differences to a renewed concern with civic integration.

This shift in analytical and normative emphasis does not presage a radical reversal. It does not amount to a return to the bad old days of arrogant assimilationism. For while the *term* 'assimilation' has returned, the *concept* has been transformed. I sketch in conclusion the main elements of this transformation:

1. A shift from *organic* understandings of assimilation, focusing on an end state of complete absorption, to *abstract* understandings of assimilation, focusing on a process of becoming similar (in some respect, to some reference population).

2. A shift from *transitive* to *intransitive* understandings of assimilation. The former see populations of immigrant origin as mouldable, meltable, *objects*; the latter see persons comprising such populations as active *subjects*. As such, to be sure, they are not busy consciously 'assimilating'. Assimilating can, of course, be a deliberate, self-conscious activity; and the poignant – and sometimes tragic – ambiguities and ambivalences bound up with it have been movingly explored by novelists, memoirists, essayists, historians, and even a few sociologists (Bauman 1988; Laitin 1995). Yet for most historians and social scientists, assimilation is an emergent tendential property of social processes at an aggregate level, rather than something that happens (consciously or unconsciously) at the

level of individual persons. As an emergent tendency at the aggregate level, assimilation is largely unintended and often invisible; and when it is made visible, it may be lamented. Yet even when it is lamented, the processual tendency we call 'assimilation' is not something done *to* persons, but rather something accomplished *by* them, not intentionally, but as an unintended consequence of myriad individual actions and choices in particular social, cultural, economic and political contexts (cf. Alba 1995, p. 4).

3. The unit within which change occurs – the unit that undergoes assimilation – is not the person but a *multi-generational population*. Population-level assimilation can occur without *any* individual-level assimilation. Linguistic assimilation at the population level, for example, can occur without any adult learning a new language, solely through the acquisition of the language of the reference population by children. Of course, this is not what ordinarily happens; we do observe some language shift at the level of individual persons. But key changes (in language and in other domains) occur intergenerationally; they occur not within persons but within abstractly constructed multi-generational populations, as new (genealogical) 'members' of the population turn out to be different – dissimilate! – from other, older members of the source population, in ways that make them more similar to members of some reference population.

4. A shift from thinking in terms of *homogeneous* units to thinking in terms of *heterogeneous* units. Assimilation does not involve a shift from one homogeneous unit to another. It involves, rather, a shift from one mode of heterogeneity – one distribution of properties – to another mode of heterogeneity, that is, to a distribution of properties more similar to the distribution prevailing in some reference population.

5. A shift in the focus of normative concern informing research on assimilation from *cultural* to *socio-economic* matters. A general openness to cultural diversity, coupled with confidence among specialists – if not always among the wider public – in the continuing robustness of processes of linguistic acculturation (Portes and Schaufliker 1994) has alleviated anxieties about cultural dimensions of assimilation. Yet the bifurcation of recent immigrants into high-skill and low-skill segments – at a moment when macro-economic changes associated with the 'hourglass economy' have decreased the rewards to low-skill, uneducated labour – has generated concerns about long-term structural marginalization (Gans 1992, Portes and Zhou 1993; somewhat more optimistic: Waldinger 1996; Perlman and Waldinger 1997). As a normatively charged concept, assimilation, in this sense, is opposed not to *difference* but to *segregation, ghettoization and marginalization*.

6. A shift from a *holistic* approach that conceptualized assimilation towards a taken-for-granted reference population – the 'core culture' or 'national society' as a whole – to a *disaggregated* approach that discards

the notion of assimilation as a single process, considers multiple reference populations, and envisions distinct processes occurring in different domains. This has entailed a shift from the *monodimensional* question, ‘how much assimilation?’ to the *multidimensional* question, ‘assimilation in what respect, over what period of time, and to what reference population?’ It has also entailed a shift from an *assimilationist* understanding of assimilation – a global empirical expectation and normative endorsement of assimilation – to an *agnostic* stance, varying by domain and reference population, concerning both the likelihood and the desirability of assimilation.

Reformulated in this manner, and divested of its ‘assimilationist’ connotations, the concept of assimilation – if not the term itself – seems not only useful but indispensable. It enables us to ask questions about the domains and degrees of emergent similarities, *and* persisting differences, between multi-generational populations of immigrant origin and particular reference populations. There are good reasons for us to want to ask such questions, regardless of whether we applaud or lament such emerging similarities. Naturally, to pose such questions is only a beginning. Assimilation is not a theory; it is simply a concept. But it is a concept we can ill do without.

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Notes

- 1 Glazer’s title, to be sure, was wry, not celebratory; it was intended to acknowledge, not to endorse, the current ascendancy of multiculturalism.
- 2 I refer to Imperial Germany rather than Nazi Germany because Nazi policies were, of course, murderously dissimilationist rather than assimilationist.
- 3 There is another transitive use of ‘assimilate’ that is less problematic, normatively and analytically. This is the use of ‘assimilate’ to mean *treat similarly* rather than *make similar*. To assimilate X’s to Y’s in one’s dealings with them is to treat them similarly rather than differently. From a differentialist normative perspective, to be sure, such similarity of treatment can be problematic. But in general ‘treating similarly’ is a transitive meaning of ‘assimilate’ quite distinct from, and normatively and analytically less suspect than, ‘making similar’.

4 For sophisticated discussions of the idea of integration, see Favell (2000) and Bauböck (2001).

5 Although this programme, committed to cultural maintenance in the interest of keeping the option of 'return' open to immigrants, is strongly differentialist in orientation, it has not been very popular. Even at the peak differentialist moment, in the early 1980s, only about 20 per cent of eligible students participated (Boyzon-Fradet 1992, p.158); by 1992–93, only 12 per cent of Algerian citizens enrolled in French primary schools – and a considerably smaller proportion of students of Algerian origin – participated (Vermès 1997).

6 Differentialist discourse concerned not only populations of immigrant origin but also regional minority cultures; on the latter see Giordan (1982).

7 German discourse on immigration and its sequels, too, has been strongly differentialist. On the historical roots of this differentialist discursive tradition, see Brubaker (1992, pp. 3–17); for contemporary manifestations, see Joppke (1999, pp. 188–9).

8 On the still more 'progressive' differentialist solution – the proposed *Niederlassungsgesetz* or settlement law that would grant *all* citizenship rights, including the right to vote in national elections, on the basis of residence rather than formal citizenship – see Joppke (1999, pp. 192–3).

9 A considerable amount of mainstream sociological research, to be sure, continued throughout this period to study processes of assimilation; for reviews see Price (1969), Hirschman (1983).

10 Some earlier literature, while positing acculturation to a single core culture, can be said to have anticipated the notion of segmented assimilation by conceptualizing structural assimilation and intermarriage among European immigrants as occurring within confessional boundaries (Kennedy 1944 [but see also the critique of Peach 1980]; Gordon 1964).

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