

TREND REPORT

ETHNIC BUSINESS AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY IN ADVANCED SOCIETIES

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Research on ethnic enterprise emerged in the United States as an attempt to explain the historical differences in business between blacks and other minorities.¹ In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Glazer and Moynihan argued that 'the small shopkeeper, small manufacturer or small entrepreneur of any kind played such an important role in the rise of immigrant groups in America that its absence from the Negro community warrants at least some discussion (1963: 30)'. Glazer and Moynihan offered several brief, possible explanations, but it was Ivan Light, in his now classic *Ethnic Enterprise in America* (1972), who gave the subject its first extended treatment. Light's was an ingenious comparison of Blacks, not with Jews, Italians, or Irish, but with immigrants - Japanese, Chinese, West Indians - whose racial characteristics made them equally distinctive; the argument was an imaginative variant of the Weber thesis, showing that it was ethnic solidarity, not individualism, that gave these immigrants an 'elective affinity' with the requirements of small business.

With the recent growth of new ethnic populations in Europe as well as the U.S., ethnic business is no longer a matter of strictly historical interest, nor is it any longer a parochial American concern. Because the new ethnic populations have grown at a time when western economies are in a phase of slow growth and massive technological change, ethnic adaptation and mobility is a principal issue in ethnic research. Hence the question raised by Glazer and Moynihan twenty years ago - does small business contribute to ethnic social mobility, and, if so, why? - dominates the research agenda for scholars working on ethnic enterprise. This paper offers a trend report on current research activities and findings, with a special emphasis on the implications of ethnic business for occupational mobility in advanced industrial societies.

Background

Since World War II, the recruitment of immigrant labour to the industrial societies of the west has been linked to the emergence of labour shortages at the bottom of the job hierarchy. Initially, the orientations of the immigrants and the characteristics of the jobs appeared congruent, because the immigrants first came as temporary migrants and the jobs were so simple that they were easily filled by a succession of often unskilled sojourners. Over time, however, the immigrant population settled down; thereupon, the liabilities of the initial entry-level positions became more severe. These positions were often detached from the main lines of structured mobility within the

primary sector of the labour market. Moreover, poor language facility and inappropriate or inadequate skills barred immigrants from entry to positions that were rationed on the basis of approved apprenticeship training or exams (see Boehning (1974) and Piore (1979) for elaborations of this argument).

The likelihood of successful economic adaptation seems further clouded by recent economic trends. The new ethnic populations are heavily overrepresented in precisely those industries most affected by economic stagnation, declining product demand, labour-shedding following technological innovation, and intensified world competition. With growth concentrated in those sectors - advanced services and high technology - that demand technical proficiency and emphasise interpersonal communication, the mismatch between job requirements and immigrants' skills has steadily widened. However, in a climate of decreasing public expenditure and low economic growth, political support for radical interventions to equalise access to employment opportunities for racial minorities has contracted sharply.

As the economic environment of the new ethnic populations has changed there is a sense, among both policymakers and academic researchers, that ethnic small businesses may offer an alternative and possibly more viable route to upward economic mobility. This view is rooted in both historical experience and the changing economics of small business. First, in the United States small business played an important role in the economic progress of several earlier immigrant groups - Jews, Chinese, Italians, Greeks and others (see Light (1972), Bonacich and Modell (1980) and Baron et al. (1975) for case studies). Their proportionately higher involvement in entrepreneurial activities continues to differentiate these groups from much of the native population (Goldscheider and Kobrin, 1980; Light, 1979; 1980; Ritterband and Cohen, 1984). Given Europe's more stable and ethnically homogeneous population, the precedents for mobility through business are not so striking. Still, the experiences of British Jews, and to a lesser extent Italians and Cypriots in Britain (see the essays in Ward and Jenkins (1984)), point to a pattern that the more recent arrivals might emulate.

Secondly, the long-term decline of small business has finally been halted; while the current economic situation is damaging to large industry, it seems increasingly supportive of small business. In the U.S., for example, the small business population increased significantly during the 1970's for the first time in decades (Fain, 1980); small firms accounted for the bulk of new jobs generated during the 1969-1976 period (Birch, 1981); and even in manufacturing, the past decade saw small firms succeed in maintaining a stable share of employment (Granovetter, 1984). The evidence for Britain and the continent also points to renewed viability among small firms, as noted by Boissevain (1984), Scase and Goffee (1982) and Berger (1981), among others.

Thirdly, the revival of small business has been widely accompanied by the infusion of new ethnic owners into the ranks of petty proprietors. In the United States, Miami has a flourishing sector of Cuban-owned businesses that includes more than 150 manufacturing firms, 230 restaurants, 30 furniture factories, a shoe factory employing 3,000 people and 30 transplanted cigar factories (*Time*, 1978; Wilson and Martin, 1982). In New York, Chinese immigrants operate more than 500 garment factories employing over 20,000 Chinese workers (Chinatown Study, 1983); newcomers from Asia and Latin America operate 60 per cent of the city's restaurants (Bailey, forthcoming); and Koreans have made great inroads into the grocery store industry,

much to the consternation of their competitors among the supermarket chains (Kim, 1981).

In Britain, the percentage of Indian males in self-employment increased from 6 per cent in 1971 to about 20 per cent in 1982, with the equivalent figures for Caribbean males at 2 per cent and 7 per cent (Ward and Jenkins, 1984; Brown, 1984). Cypriots and Asians revived London's dying East End clothing trade (Saifullah Khan, 1979) and created a new one in the West Midlands (Ward, Randall and Krčmář, 1984). Chinese and Cypriot immigrants have come to dominate the traditional fish and chips trade, having driven native English owners out of the business (Watson, 1977). Indian and Pakistani entrepreneurs are now prominent in several other areas of retailing (chemists' shops, small grocery shops, discount airline tickets and so forth), even in areas such as Glasgow where South Asian settlement has been on a relatively small scale (Krčmář, 1984).

The expansion of ethnic business in continental Europe has been held back by a pattern of immigration quite different from that into the United Kingdom. In many areas the terms of entry for migrant workers do not allow self employment, and the legal/institutional arrangements for small business constitute a further barrier (Ward, Randall and Krčmář, 1984). Despite this, there is evidence of a growing ethnic small business sector. Turkish immigrant entrepreneurs have reintroduced garment manufacture to Amsterdam (Boissevain, 1981; Tap, 1983). Boissevain, Choenni and Grotenbreg (1984) found that 91 per cent of the 183 Surinamese businesses that they examined in Amsterdam had started within the past five years. Phizacklea, Morokvasic and Rudolf are currently analysing the niches within the clothing trade occupied by Turks, Yugoslavs and Vietnamese in Paris and by Turks in Berlin, where Blaschke and Scholz have been examining the expansion of Turkish business (see Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik (1982)).

Researchers on ethnic business are now seeking explanations for the ability of immigrants to exploit these small business opportunities in economies that remain dominated by large-scale, technologically advanced concerns. Their research has generated diverse working frameworks, each of which comes to quite different conclusions regarding the determinants and implications of ethnic business.

The cultural approach

According to the cultural approach, entrepreneurial success is culture-bound. Cultural explanations of ethnic business often suggest that marginalised immigrant groups import traits and behaviour patterns that bear an 'elective affinity' with the qualities required for small business success. Nathan Glazer argued that the historical experience of being a 'stranger' combined with the traditions of 'Jewish Puritanism' to give Jewish immigrants to the U.S. a crucial entrepreneurial bent (Glazer, 1955). More recently, Illsoo Kim (1981) has offered a particularly insightful formulation of the character structure of Korean immigrants to the United States, many of whom are from families converted to Protestantism by missionaries working in Korea. Kim traced the entrepreneurial drive among Korean immigrants to two sources: state centralism in both pre-industrial and contemporary Korea, which bred marginality and individualism within a class of first generation urbanites; and the value structure

common to Confucianism and Protestantism, both of which emphasise self-abnegation and self-control and thereby reinforce the drive for small business gain.

A currently more popular alternative approach derives from the work of Ivan Light, whose study of Chinese, Japanese and West Indian immigrants in the first half of the 20th century documented the role that kinship and place-of-origin groups played in organising and capitalising ethnic concerns (Light, 1972). More recently, Bonnett (1981) and Laguerre (1984) have shown how rotating credit associations continue to funnel capital to neophyte West Indian and Haitian businesses in New York City. Similarly Bernard Wong (1979), in a study of contemporary immigrant firms in New York's Chinatown, has demonstrated the importance of traditional concepts of obligation, face and honour. Werbner (1984) explained the emergence of a high level of entrepreneurship among Pakistanis in the Manchester garment trade by their ability to draw on cultural resources unavailable to longer-established minorities in the host society.

Another vein of argument identifies the business success of contemporary ethnic or immigrant groups as a 'middleman minority' phenomenon. Traditionally, middleman minorities have been associated with pre-capitalist situations, where their role has been ascribed to the possession of valued skills or status considerations (Armstrong, 1976; Zenner, 1980). Bonacich, however, has argued that the middleman minority role persists into advanced capitalist societies despite the attenuation or the disappearance of original contextual factors. Its persistence lies in a complex of interacting and cultural factors. Middleman minorities begin as sojourners, enduring short term deprivations for the long term goal of return to their homelands, and choosing livelihoods that are portable and easily liquidated. This orientation elicits a hostile reaction from the host society, which in turn strengthens solidaristic behaviour and in-group economic ties; one example is the case of Japanese immigrants in the United States in the first half of the 20th century: Modell (1977) and Bonacich and Modell (1980) have argued that the rapid Japanese penetration of small scale, speculative lines in California agriculture exemplifies the middleman minority phenomenon. While sojourning does not appear to be a characteristic of those new immigrants currently successful in business (on the British case see Ward (1985)) certain elements associated with middleman minorities do reappear in many immigrant business situations. Korean immigrants, for example, are heavily involved in retail operations in New York's black and Hispanic ghettos, a situation marked by a high level of inter-ethnic antagonism that in turn heightens feelings of community among the Koreans (Kim, 1981). C.C. Wong's (1977) comparison of Chinese and black retail outlets in the Watts ghetto of Los Angeles shows how social distance from their black customers allows Chinese merchants to engage in competitive practices that black storekeepers, with social ties to the community, cannot follow.

A common objection to cultural analysis is that it lacks an analysis of the economic environment in which immigrant entrepreneurs function. In this light, group solidarity or a willingness to take risks may be a necessary condition of entrepreneurship, but neither is a sufficient condition for business success. To grow and prosper the immigrant owner needs (i) a niche in which the small firm is viable, (ii) access to ownership opportunities and (iii) the resources needed to exploit them (for a more extended argument in this vein, see Aldrich et al. (1983); Waldinger, (1983)). While agreeing on the importance of the opportunity structure, researchers still differ in their assessment of its role as a condition of or constraint on immigrant small business.

The ecological approach

The ecological approach, building on the work of Park (1936) and Burgess (1928), emphasises the structure of modern economies which sharply constrains the size of the small business class. Openings for ethnic business owners only emerge as vacancies arise in the existing small business population. The crucial factor in this process is the pattern of succession by which one ethnic group succeeds another, first among a neighbourhood's residents, and then among its small business class (Aldrich, 1975). As the native group in a residential area no longer replaces itself, native entrepreneurs seek out business opportunities outside the local area. Given a naturally high rate of failure among all small businesses, the absence of members from the older established group willing to open up new firms in 'changed' neighbourhoods creates vacancies for potential immigrant businesspeople. Lacking alternative opportunities for mobility, immigrants pursue these new possibilities.

The residential succession model's applicability to business ownership succession was first tested by Aldrich and Reiss (1976). Their study of three United States cities monitored changes in the occupancy of 648 business sites over a six year period and correlated them with changes in the proportion of blacks and Puerto Ricans in the neighbourhood. Their results can be summarised in two generalizations. First, as residential succession proceeded, the proportion of white buyers for vacated businesses decreased and the proportion of black and Puerto Rican buyers increased, leading to an overall increase in the proportion of business owned by ethnic minorities. Secondly, because of the lack of new white business owners and the effects of economic and other barriers to black and Puerto Rican entry into business, many vacated sites were not occupied by new owners, leading to an increase in the proportion of vacant sites or sites occupied by non-profit organisations.

Within the past ten years, investigators in Great Britain and elsewhere have begun to link patterns of residential concentration with Asian business ownership. In the London borough of Wandsworth Aldrich (1980) found a correlation of .38 between the percentage of population of New Commonwealth origin and the proportion of shops owned by Asians and West Indians, using wards as the spatial unit. Mullins (1979: 404), in a study of Croydon, found that 'most Asian businesses occupy relatively small, old, low-rent premises and these premises are concentrated in the same areas as Asian residents, areas where the urban fabric developed at an earlier date'. Chan and Cheung (1982) found that the large Chinese population of Toronto, concentrated in three centres, formed a strong basis for the development of Chinese enterprises. Almost two-thirds of the Chinese-owned businesses in the sample were located in neighbourhoods that were heavily Chinese.

The first longitudinal test of the ecological model in Britain was conducted by Aldrich and McEvoy (1984) in Bradford, Leicester and the London borough of Ealing. They completed 580 interviews with Asian and white shopkeepers in 1978, and returned to the same sites in 1980, 1982 and 1984. Using 500 m² areas, they regressed the proportion of Asian-owned shops on the percentage of Asians in an area, and found that unstandardised regression coefficients were roughly the same in each city — .60. This cross-sectional finding was complemented by a panel analysis. Changes in the business population were correlated with changes in areas' residential populations, based on their Asian population in 1978. The proportion of sites occupied by profit-oriented shops steadily declined from 1978 to 1984 as shops were left empty or

converted to non-business uses. The central finding, however, was that the proportion of new shop owners who were Asian was strongly associated with the proportion of Asians in the area. The association between residential composition and Asian shop ownership arose not from white owners leaving racially changing areas, but rather from the failure of whites to buy into the area.

Additional growth among ethnic businesses is generated by the demand for special ethnic products; and servicing these special ethnic consumer tastes provides ethnic owners with a protected market (Aldrich, Cater, Jones, McEvoy and Velleman, 1985). However, the limits of the ethnic trade tend to be quickly reached, and in competing in the open market immigrants lose this advantage. Since the small business niche is a powerful selection factor, leaving only those potential entrepreneurs prepared to work extremely long hours, aided by their spouses, children and extended family members, immigrant owners may differ little from their native competitors (Aldrich, Cater, Jones and McEvoy, 1983).

The interactive approach

The interactive approach suggests that ethnic businesses proliferate in industries where there is a congruence between the demands of the economic environment and the informal resources of the ethnic population; consequently, ethnic business-owners have a favourable position in competition with native proprietors. This approach derives from a series of industry case studies conducted primarily in New York (Bailey, forthcoming; Freedman and Korazim, 1985; Gallo, 1983; Waldinger, 1984, 1985; but also see Mars and Ward (1984) and Ward (1983) for a very similar formulation emerging out of a series of ethnic group studies). In this framework, the demand for small business activities and the supply of existing and potential business owners interact to generate immigrant entrepreneurship. The demand for small business activities emanates from markets whose small size, heterogeneity, or susceptibility to flux and instability limit the potential for mass production and mass distribution. Since such conditions favour small-scale enterprise, they lower the capital barriers to immigrants with limited capital resources. Instability, however, makes it difficult to secure a strongly attached labour force and breeds dissatisfaction and conflict within the workforce. Therefore, small firms confront a chronic problem in organising the labour force and developing a mechanism for the transmission and maintenance of skills.

On the supply side, immigrant owners have informal resources that provide a competitive resolution to some of the organisational problems of the small firm. These informal resources consist of connections to a supply of family and ethnic labour as well as a set of understandings about the appropriate behaviour and expectations within the work setting. They provide a conduit for the flow of labour market information, and create a normative climate conducive to a stable employment relationship. Informal ties not only provide immigrant owners with privileged access to a cheaper source of labour — a crucial advantage in the competition against non-immigrant firms — but also stabilise work relationships in a context of loosely defined work roles. Stable work relations allow immigrant workers to acquire those managerial and production skills which permit them to move into entrepreneurial positions. Thus, once in place, informal mechanisms of recruitment and skill

transmission facilitate the growth and proliferation of immigrant firms beyond the original market base.

One example is the analysis of immigrant business in the New York garment industry, where immigrant firms have proliferated since the early 1970s even though the local industry has declined from 170,000 jobs in 1970 to 120,000 jobs in 1984. Changes in the international division of labour have transformed New York, historically the principal centre of garment production in the U.S., into a spot market specialising in fashion goods and overruns on more standardised items. These conditions have lowered entry barriers by favouring small firms with flexible arrangements and relatively simple production-line technologies. Chinese and Hispanic immigrants, who are blocked by educational deficiencies and poor English language facility from other avenues of mobility, have gone into business in large numbers; start-ups of new garment contracting (cut, make and trim) factories are virtually monopolised by members of these two groups (see, for example, Chinatown Garment Industry Study (1983)). Once in business, immigrant owners recruit labour through the immigrant network; a survey of Dominican-owned firms, for example, found that most recruited through migration chains that linked a factory in New York City to a common hometown in the Dominican Republic (Waldinger, 1984). Hiring through the immigrant network tends to define the employment exchange in terms of personal loyalties and relationships, thus strengthening attachment to the firm and enabling owners to establish authority along paternalistic lines (Wong, 1979; Waldinger, 1984). By contrast, the remaining native-owned firms lack direct connections to the immigrant labour supply and rely on market mechanisms for recruitment. The workforce that they obtain is characterised by a low level of commitment and stability. Moreover, ethnic differences between management and labour exacerbate conflict over production quotas, behavioural roles and absenteeism, thereby further contributing to turnover (Waldinger, 1985).

Conclusion and assessment

While the evidence on ethnic enterprise is growing and impressive, and existing scholarly work has generated a series of insightful research approaches, there remains little consensus on the determinants and implications of ethnic enterprise. Researchers using the interactive framework, for example, argue that small business can play an important role in promoting upward mobility, while scholars working within the ecological framework see immigrant business as confined to peripheral positions offering low returns and little potential for further growth. Although research that emphasises the importance of opportunity structures succeeds fairly well in explaining ethnic business as a general phenomenon, it does considerably less well in elucidating why certain ethnic groups achieve greater business success than others — precisely the strong point of the cultural approach.

Regardless of theoretical approach, much of the work on ethnic business remains exploratory. Until recently, many of the studies were designed to generate, not test, hypotheses. Indeed, some of the case studies were accidental by-products of labour market studies, in which immigrant enterprise became an object of attention only once it appeared that competition between native and immigrant workers was mediated by the competition between native and immigrant firms. The reports produced by

Aldrich et al. provide the only instances to date in which hypotheses latent in the theoretical literature have been rigorously operationalised and tested.

Government intervention in the area of ethnic business, whether designed to secure economic or social objectives, is increasingly common. It should be noted, though, that the different approaches yield greatly varying policy implications. Since cultural analysis suggests that business success is a product of immigrants' original endowments, it leaves relatively little scope for public intervention. At best, it implies that government should be discriminating in its approach, possibly offering incentives to facilitate business activity among those groups with the appropriate cultural traits, while focussing on training, job creation, or anti-discrimination measures for those groups less inclined towards entrepreneurial success. The implications of the ecological framework are not dissimilar: given the constraints on small business, it would make more sense to emphasise direct means of job creation, whether in the public or private sectors. Only the interactive approach suggests that government might possess instruments that could affect ethnic business success. The implication is that public authorities should target those industries where immigrants' informal resources might provide significant competitive advantages, and then create programmes that would ease credit barriers, improve marketing mechanisms, and provide training in business skills (e.g. accountancy) (Ward and Reeves, 1980; Wilson, 1983).

Small firms have traditionally been associated with low pay, paternalistic management, and high failure rates. There is a further problem of constrained access to a declining pool of jobs in the primary sector of the labour market. Accordingly, arguments for interventions to benefit minority business have to be quite positive, and must find ways of meeting or overcoming the costs traditionally associated with small firms. An important line of enquiry is to identify the circumstances in which a proportion of the newly created firms, using finance and labour from within the ethnic group and servicing community needs, can emerge over time as established businesses with a stable niche in the wider business environment.

Further progress in the field is likely to come as researchers move beyond the study of individual cases (whether of ethnic groups or particular industries) to comparative analysis. Fruitful possibilities include analysis of patterns of business development among comparable minorities in different contexts (e.g. West Indians in the U.S., compared to West Indians in Britain and Creoles in Amsterdam); among different minorities in the same location (e.g. Chinese and Hispanics in New York; Turks and Surinamese in the Netherlands); and among the different industries in which immigrant firms tend to grow (e.g. clothing, construction, retailing).

Comparative analysis is also likely to be of particular significance in examining policy dimensions. One pertinent issue, for instance, is the applicability of policies developed by the U.S. Minority Business Development Agency and Small Business Administration to the economic situation in which minorities are found in Western Europe. This would reveal the importance of differences in institutional and political arrangements, differences in economic context and differences in the characteristics of minorities.

Notes

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- 1 The present paper deals with ethnic business development within advanced western economies. The approaches set out here, however, are equally applicable to a much wider range of multi-ethnic societies, particularly in the Caribbean, East Africa and South East Asia, in which differential participation rates in business have been seen as a threat to stable social and economic development (leading, in the case of Uganda, to the expulsion of Asians in 1972). Attempts to raise the level of participation among established populations, disadvantaged vis-à-vis more recently arrived ethnic groups, include the measures to Africanise business in East Africa and to encourage entrepreneurship among Bumiputras in Malaysia (Mahathir, 1981).

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