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Sociology of Race & Ethnic Relations

mid-term exam

Irish, Jews, Italians, Greeks, Swedesits form is always the same: a people beset by hardships and oppression in their own country bravely crossed the sea to America, a land that promises freedom and opportunity. Once they arrived, however, they encounter prejudice, oppression and difficult times. However, thy never lose faith in the dream that originally compelled them. They work hard, refuse to be discouraged by the abuses that harm their lives and hinder their progress, and eventually succeed. (Steinberg Pg 95)

As it is well known, American history has been always a story of immigrants. Some came intrigued by the prospects of a new world, some in search of the promised land others were forced and dragged, meanwhile others came as runaways from their countries. The circumstances under which each group entered the U.S. among with other many factors, had definitely determined their chances for success.

The one factor usually argued is the different set of values, moral attitudes and culture known as ethnicity. It is undeniable that ethnicity plays an important part in any group's development, but it is not as determinative as the role that such group occupies in society at a certain timeframe.

At the turn of the 19th century there were massive waves of immigration from eastern and northern Europe to the U.S. One notable group was the Jew community. Prosecuted and

Oppressed in countries like Russia and Germany and with no country of their own, they arrived in America seeking new opportunities. Their ethnic differences, such as religion, proved them foreign on this new country populated and rule in its majority by white protestant Englishmen. Nevertheless, they had held entrepreneurial jobs back in Europe and their level of literacy was relatively high. Their skills, as well as their business savvy, and a strong sense of community, opened a door for entering and succeeding in the expanding industrial economy of the U.S. Such industry was at that time in great need for skilled labor and in 1900, sixty-seven percent of skilled workers in the U.S. were of Jewish origin. Due to these facts they had the chance of occupying better positions than the rest of European immigrant groups.

Italian immigrants for instance were the largest group of Catholics entering the U.S. around the 1900's. Most Italians were originally workers of the land and had little formal schooling in Italy. Their level of literacy was low and their negative response toward education was reflected in their economic and social mobility. (St 142) What this meant was that for Italian immigrants, education wasn't that important since they came from a peasant background. Coming from a value system that discouraged education, they basically occupied the lowest sections of economy. For them chances were limited and most of them entered the labor force as low-wage workers in factories and construction. At first, the Italian population in the U.S. was predominantly male: usually the father of a family emigrated first, bringing his family after. Unlike Irish, Italian women were not likely to emigrate on their own. Family values in Italy usually impeded women from working outside their households.

On the other hand, lots of Catholic Irish women emigrated to America on their own, escaping from the oppression of English penal laws and later from the popular potato famine in Ireland. They were able to find jobs in the textile industry and as domestic maids. At that time domestic household jobs were considered as degrading and were usually assigned to black servants in the south. However, Irish maids were the ideal workers for household: they were white and spoke English and at the same time they would work for low pay. This fact proves to be a good example of how the Catholic Irish entered the labor system at the same step as

the newly freed black population. In the early years of immigration Irishmen competed with blacks for the same jobs, and they were considered of the same class. However, as Ignatiev discusses in the book *How the Irish became white* the Irish learned that to succeed they needed to keep their black competitors at the bottom of the economic system. They united with the WASP population collaborating to continue the oppression of black population so that they could climb the economic ladder. Their strategy was that they supported anti-abolitionist movements and would work for less pay than blacks so that soon they monopolized all the low-wage jobs available. Once they secured their jobs, they organized labor unions in which African Americans were excluded. They quickly became white at the price of denying their culture selling themselves to the wasp majority, and pushing back their black competitors. Indeed, if African Americans had have the chance to enter the industrial workforce they would probably occupy today the same class and position as any other immigrant group such as Poles, Italians, or Irish.

However, as Steinberg states: *Unlike the millions of Africans who were imported against their will, and unlike Indians and Mexicans who were conquered by force, European immigrants came as a matter of choice.* (St 37) There is a big difference between the immigrant experience and the situations and circumstances in which other ethnic groups lived the development of American Capitalism. The most prejudiced groups were in the first place the original inhabitants of the land: Native Americans, later denominated Indians. They were conquered, destroyed and finally pushed away from their territory during the expansion of the English colonies. The situation repeated later during the expansion of the colonies to the lands of the west and the south. The Mexican population was pushed further down as the English occupied the territories of California, Texas and New Mexico. Native Americans and Mexicans were not given a chance to participate in the U.S. industrial development. They found themselves retained in reservations and excluded, they did not even constitute a significant part of the labor force. Ironically, Mexicans are considered today as alien immigrants, and kept as a part of reserve labor being employed on the lowest occupations.

On the other hand African Americans entered the U.S. dragged from their countries of origin by the English colonies that were in need of cheap labor as the agricultural development was about to take place in the early 18th century. They were enslaved, isolated, and kept as inferiors by the difference of race. Even later on, when slavery was abolished they were kept on the lowest step of economy. Most of the black population in the south was kept by landlords that would give them a parcel of terrain in exchange for labor and crops. Nevertheless they were always kept on debt and they turned to be economically enslaved. This situation took to a massive migration from the south to northern cities like Chicago and New York where they occupied the lowest occupations and suffered from segregation.

They formed the base of reserve labor, among with Irish immigrants. The capitalist system always tried to keep these groups from upward mobility , being able to keep paying low wages as long as there was a group in the back willing to do the job for less pay. That was one of the reasons for the capitalist to fight against abolishment, among with the sense of xenophobia that had always characterized the wasp population as a strategy to keep themselves at the top of the economic and political power.

However it is very simple for an upper middle class American to assume that all the different ethnic groups started at the same bottom of economy. Well, this assumption can be proved wrong by looking at the facts, and the different circumstances in which each ethnic group entered America. It is certain that some groups had it definitely easier than others, in the struggle of economic success. Unfortunately there had always been one group on the bottom so that the rest of them could climb up. Unfortunately, racial and ethnic features had been only the excuse to determine which one.

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