

USA versus Italy: Diversity versus Mixing

Jerry Krase (October 06, 2009)



Many otherwise astute Italian-born commentators on American life often mistake the grand indicators of diversity in American population statistics as indicators of extensive social mixing. Although America is far more diverse than Italy, and in some places like New York City, a great deal of more or less pleasant social mixing is apparent, the facts on the ground are that in most of the



USA the situation is not very different from that which can be found back home in Italy.

I had a pleasant visit today at my home by a young photographer who has been doing work on Italian Feasts in the US, and we got to discussing our observations of immigrant/ethnic neighborhoods in Italy and the United States. Obviously we both are very interested in what such places look like (I saw his work on line and he is much better photographer than I, by the way.). It made me think about how 'hard' statistical data can be misconstrued on both sides of the Atlantic. Then when I returned to my 'Traces' blog here at i-italy.org I was confronted by Otto Capelli's superb Op-Ed on how to interpret the first Columbus Day with a half-black president in the box. So, I decided to offer here a version of an essay I recently wrote for German readers about the reality of American diversity. Before reading this I hope you consider how close was the Obama/Biden-McCain/Palin contest in which the current President received slightly more than 40% of the white male vote.

Even before the turn of the 21st Century and the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th US President there were numerous, pronouncements about increasing American diversity. Much has been explained by the scale of immigration, yet compared to a century earlier, the current foreign-born proportion is hardly as great. More likely, extra attention to diversity is related to other factors such as the "racial" composition of the "Newest Americans," conflicted attitudes toward diversity among all Americans, and Post-9/11 fears. America has endured a host of "anti-"movements (-Catholicism, -Semitism, -Immigration), English-Only, and multiple Racisms so it is likely that this too shall pass.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that substituted hemispheric caps for a century of Euro-centric, national-origin quotas cleared the way for people under-represented in American immigrant history, and by 2007 one in three U.S. residents was a "minority." Hispanics were the largest and fastest-growing group, with 45.5 million persons (15% of the population). Blacks were second, with 40.7 million (13.5 %), followed by the second fastest-growing, Asians, at 15.2 million (5%). The Census also reported that 38.1 million foreign-born residents comprised 12.6 % of the population. Then, in 2008, it predicted that by 2042, more than half of the population would be minorities with much of the increase due to immigration.

Broad comments about national population statistics often give false impressions, so I offered my own understanding of "Diversity in America" to several scholarly Internet discussion groups:

Friends: I am putting together a short essay on Diversity in America and will argue, metaphorically, that from a distance (like from space) looking at national data one might assume that America is very mixed but that as one lowers the level of analysis one finds that diversity is not evenly distributed and that even "diverse" places are different from each other as to the composition of the diversity... there is great deal of social mixing among younger (20 -30 somethings); college-educated, white collar, middle and upper-middle class folks, but expect that this still is not the American norm...

In response, I was deluged with examples of limited diversity at local levels, as well as references to tensions between old and new groups, and among minorities themselves. Reporting in 2007 about the finer points of American diversity, David Minckler, noted that although minorities comprised more than one-third of the national population, they were not evenly distributed across the country but concentrated along the periphery of the continental United States as well as in Hawaii. Hispanics are found in California, Texas and Florida. In New Mexico they are the largest group at 44 % of the total population. Blacks are concentrated on the East Coast and the South, as well as two Midwest Border States - Michigan and Illinois. The smallest minority group, Asians, are almost 40 percent of Hawaii's population. Other Asian concentrations are on the West Coast, in New York, New Jersey, Texas and Illinois. California and Texas together have nearly a third of all the nation's minority

populations and in contrast, Midwestern and the extreme Northeastern states had the highest percentage of whites. As to the 37.5 million foreign-born Americans estimated by the 2006 American Community Survey, they are likely to be found in the states with large “minority” populations such as “coastal” California, New York, Texas, Florida and New Jersey, as well as Illinois in the Midwest.

California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas are already designated as “majority-minority” states, in which minorities exceed the majority (White) population. Arizona, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, and New York are next in line. As the U.S. population rises from 280 million in 2000 to about 420 million in 2050, Latinos will grow from 36 to 103 million, and Asians from 11 to 33 million. Non-Latino Whites, now about 70% of the U.S. population, are expected to drop to barely more than 50% in 2050, and Blacks will increase slightly to 15%, compared with about 13% now. Whites will cease to be a majority around the mid-2050s. Writing about these changes in the *The Los Angeles Times*, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, quoted demographer William Frey as saying “One America will be white, middle-class and graying, and then you’ll have this new kind of globalized America coming to the fore,” that he called a “racial generation gap.”

On the positive side, immigration keeps the United States growing and provides working taxpayers to fund Medicare and Social Security for, the mostly White, elderly.. On the negative side, debates have developed along racial lines in California, where those who pay property taxes for schools different racially from the pupils. The form diversity takes also differ by region, for example the West will have an even greater Mexican flavor, and the South will become more multi-ethnic as the number of Asians and Hispanics grow at more rapidly than that of Blacks.

It is expected that relations between immigrants and native-born Americans might be strained, and that problems emerge from competition between minority and majority groups. However, Nick Corona Vaca, in *The Presumed Alliance* wrote that as Latino and African Americans increasingly live side by side, a “Rainbow Coalition” has not materialized. Instead “... competition over power and resources has surprisingly led to conflict. Many African Americans see the growth of Latinos as a threat to their social, economic, and political gains.” Similar tensions exist between Black consumers and immigrant Asian shopkeepers in New York, Haitians and American Blacks in Miami, as well as Mexican, Central American, and other Latino street gangs in the Southwest.

Despite being “A Nation of Immigrants,” not everyone wants to share America with “others.” On expression of this can be found on the “American Renaissance Movement” website as to “What We Believe”: “Race is an important aspect of individual and group identity... Race and racial conflict are at the heart of the most serious challenges the Western World faces in the 21st century.” Brenda Walker writes there that

“...The Census Bureau may look like the gold standard of government bean-counters, immersed as it is in the logic of numbers. But the agency also has a propaganda wing tucked among the spreadsheets, pimping the idea that America’s multiculturalization and its massive population growth promises a fine future for the country...

American attitudes toward immigrant diversity are found along a continuum with three major themes, each having a culinary metaphor. At one end is Assimilationism, or “The Melting Pot” theory. On the other extreme we find a “Salad Bowl” symbolizing Multiculturalism, In the middle is the “Stew Pot” of Cultural Pluralism. As–similationists believe that immigrants ought to melt into, and become indistinguishable from the whole. Multiculturalists argue that distinct cultural groups ought to be preserved. Multiculturalism is linked to “Post-1965” immigration. Retention of immigrant cultures today is enhanced by communication and transportation technologies making it possible to stay connected to places of origin. However, the reality of everyday American life falls in the middle of the spectrum – in Cultural Pluralism. While Assimilationism abhors difference and Multiculturalism idolizes it, Cultural Pluralism recognizes the positive value of diversity but only in tandem with



overarching “American” values.

As was noted at the start of this essay, from a distance it might appear that the new elements thrown into the American “Melting Pot” are blending together, but up close they appear as pieces of a rapidly changing jigsaw puzzle. I frequently ride on a public bus that begins its journey in an almost totally white section of Brooklyn, New York and traverses Afro-American, Caribbean, Mexican, Pakistani, Orthodox Jewish, and Chinese neighborhoods, ending in a Russian/Ukrainian section called “Little Odessa.” As they get on and off at different stops they appear to blend but seldom speak or recognize each other.

I like to think of American society as this bus. Since the last Great Immigration Wave of 1880-1929 to the present, America has worked despite diversity because it has been structured in such a way that in order to get what it is that you want -- prosperity, education, a decent place to live, safety and security -- you must cooperate with people with whom you are different. If there is a conflict, that bus is not going to move, something is going to happen and they’re not going to get where they want to go.

As to the near future, I do see a potential problem in the naïve commitment to a multicultural model that elevates difference over commonality. And, it remains to be seen whether the inevitable “New Majority” will change the rules of the game. But, given the urban mixing of educated young people in the middle and upper middle class who are slated to become the leaders of our ever-changing society, I seriously doubt it.

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