

What Happens Next – Sunday February 28, 2021

Bioethics, US-Israel Relations, Selling the Museum's Art, and Who is White?

Richard Alba QA

Larry Bernstein:

I want to start with, what is white? Recently, there's been discussions about Asian Americans and whether or not they are white for this identity purpose. And my first question is, is what is it that makes them mainstream? Is there a natural inclination for all people to want to be in this majority group and therefore try to be perceived as, whether it be white or whatever that-

Richard Alba:

I don't think it's necessary to be perceived as white. I would define the mainstream in the following way that it refers to sectors of society where ethno racial origins no longer play a very important role in determining what people's status is and how they interact with others. And so many Asian, certainly those who are Asian and white, are in this situation, are able to interact rather easily with, say, whites, but that doesn't really make them white. And people can still recognize that there's some kind of distinction involved.

Actually, I often go back, if you don't mind, to my own childhood experiences. I grew up in a part of the Bronx where there's a great deal of mixing between ethnic Catholics and Jews. And as a child, I had friends who were different from me. I grew up as Catholic. I had many Jewish friends. I mean, that they were Jewish really didn't play very much role in terms of determining the kind of friendships we had or how we interacted with one another. But it wasn't as if this was invisible to us, this difference.

Jonathan Moreno:

So my dad immigrated to this country in 1925 from Austria. He actually made it into the country because he bribed somebody to get an extended visa, and then a woman married him in late 1920s. That's how he got citizenship. It was a bad time to try to get into this country if you were a Jew or from Southern or Eastern Europe. Immigration laws started to change in the 1960s. You know more about this than I do, but how do you think immigration laws and policies will affect what you're describing?

Richard Alba:

That's a very good question. Well, I think first of all, that there is a very large population now of immigrants and their descendants in the United States. It's about a quarter of the population. So even if immigration today were to shut down in the way that, let's say, the last administration hoped to shut it down, this would still be an issue because there would be these very large groups of people who were distinct in terms of their places in American society. So, I

don't think that immigration laws are likely to change this ongoing process very much, although obviously, they will affect the numbers of people in different groups. I do think that the United States needs immigrants, and there are... I mean, think of our healthcare system, which I know you know a lot about, and I don't see how that can survive without immigrants.

So I think that the pressures of economic need are going to force us to continue to take in large numbers of immigrants. And that doesn't just mean people coming with good educations from India. We really also need people to fulfill service jobs. And those have often been filled by the people coming from Latin America. And by the way, Jonathan, I have to say that I noticed that... I looked you up as you were talking, and so you're the son of Jacob Moreno.

Jonathan Moreno:

Yes.

Richard Alba:

And that's a name that means a lot to me because I began my sociology career as an analyst of social networks. So, think of it in terms of Moreno's sociometry. Yes. So, we have that tie.

Jonathan Moreno:

We'll talk offline. That's great. Thank you for mentioning.

Larry Bernstein:

This is Larry. Just as another side, my grandfather attended the University of Vienna Medical School, which was the same medical school that Jonathan's father attended as well in the very same program. They were both in the psychoanalysis division of the medical school, which I think is really interesting. They had some of the same teachers. Jonathan and I had spoken about this offline as well. So I just think it's interesting that you can be part of the same community in one country. And then now, Jonathan and I are both part of the University of Pennsylvania family either currently or past.

So, Richard, I was thinking about maybe taking the temperature down a little bit. We're so sensitive to race and thinking of it through partisan eyes here in the United States. What if we chose a different country where there's been hostility and where things have tempered? And I'm thinking like, let's pick one like Ireland, for example? So you've got Ireland, you've got Northern Ireland, you've got Protestants, you've got Catholics, and it was very bloody one generation ago. And I perceive that the temperature has come way down. I don't know how much intermarriage has played a role in that, and I don't know whether or not religiosity has declined.

Richard Alba:

I think, well, I don't know a lot about the Irish situation. I think so we're both on uncertain ground here. But I do think that there have been real attempts to of a type of affirmative action has been used to make breakthroughs for Catholics into sort of the different economic tiers of Irish society. And by the way, if we look at the tiers of the labor market in the United States, there's something quite remarkable going on. And that is the penetration of the children of immigrants into the higher tiers of the US labor market. This is something I've done research on. So, if you look at young people who are entering the occupations that are ranked, let's say in the top quarter, about a third of them now are non-white or Hispanic. And a big part of this, I mean we all know the Asian story, but the big part of this is also native-born Hispanics.

And I mean, if we look also then at the pool of people from which those moving to the higher tiers are going to be hired, like college graduates, that's changed very dramatically in recent decades. And I, in my book, I use an American Council of Education report that comes from 2019 and said that now 60% of the BAs are awarded to whites and 40% to people who are not white. And the biggest advance, according to this report, in the last decade was the surge of Hispanic college graduates. So, I think there's a kind of ongoing process of mobility and integration into the mainstream that particularly affects the children of immigrants. And again, the sort of awful note in this story concerns African-Americans because they are not benefiting, not nearly as much from the sort of changing diversity in college graduates and among, and in the higher tiers of the labor market.

Larry:

Our next topic is going to be on Tiger Woods. And I want to you use him as an example of mixed race.

Richard Alba:

Absolutely. He himself says he's cablinasian.

Larry:

Exactly. And here's a guy who's part Thai, part Chinese, part Indian, part black and white. And, I think initially he came out when he first started in those Nike ads articulating his African-American background, but there was a sense among the African-American community that he really wasn't black. How do we think of Tiger as an example of someone who fits this mixed culture? And how the public responded to him?

Richard Alba:

Well, I mean, look at the concern that's been expressed over his accident. So, I think that he really is a kind of a very mainstream figure. And, I mean, of course he also married a white woman, which is, of course what I described about as many of the mixed individuals are marrying whites. So, I think he does exemplify these patterns.

Larry:

And then you also discussed how we went from what white really meant was white Protestant, and then it became white Judeo-Christian.

Richard Alba:

Yes.

Larry:

Do you think that's a function of changes in religiosity? Or changes in fears about Catholicism.

Richard Alba:

I think definitely it involves changes in fears, especially about Catholicism. I mean, the 1950s, it was where this process really became very visible, and this was still a time of great religiosity, I think in American society. It really meant that that Catholicism and Judaism in some forms became just American religions and their place in American society was no longer questioned in the way that it had been, let's say, prior to the middle of the 20th century. I mean, look at the contrast between the 1928 presidential election and the 1960 presidential election.

So, in 1928, Smith is the first Catholic nominee of a major party for president and in many parts of the country, your Protestant ministers thundered from their pulpits against electing a Catholic to the presidency.

And you talk about fears. I mean, there were these kinds of conspiratorial ideas around at the time that, there was even, I think in the South, there was a picture of Smith cutting a ribbon on a New York City subway tunnel. And the legend read that he was cutting a ribbon on a tunnel through which the Pope would enter the United States, after his election. And it's not as if all of those fears melted away in 1960, for sure. And Kennedy was required to make the case to the American people, that he would not be guided by his religion in as president. But I think, it was just a very different time and Catholicism was much closer to widespread acceptability.

Tevi Troy:

You said something interesting about "many whites have embraced white nationalism." Can you give me a sense of what many is and what is white nationalism meaning? But is there a sense of if you're making whites that kind of the enemy, then people who wouldn't have banded together previously, let's say Polish Catholics and British descended WASPs saying, "Oh, well, I guess we are in this together because we are seen as the enemy in this society."

Richard Alba:

Well, first of all, I have a big problem with the majority minority narrative on just the grounds you've named. That is to say it portrays a society that is fractured between two different groups, two blocks, one of which is, according to it, declining in numbers. And the other of which is increasing in numbers. And, and presumably, the person who hears this envisions a kind of competition, which is gradually becoming more in the favor of the minority blocks.

Now social psychologists have done studies of how whites react to this narrative. And they have found that there's a general pattern of whites moving in a more conservative direction on policy matters, on racial attitudes. The narrative has a real effect. And in, as I'm sure you know, that the political scientists who've analyzed the 2016 election have said that one of the factors that drove Trump's win was the racial resentments felt by many whites. Presumably these are the people who are reacting most strongly to this narrative of change in American society. I think the narrative is misguided on many levels, but it's simply distorted. It distorts what's really going on in American society, which is that there are these ground level processes by which many people are integrating across these ethno racial boundaries.