9-1-2001

Assimilation, Pluralism and Multiculturalism: The Policy of Racial/Ethnic Identity in America

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In the spring of 1921, 19 year old Annamaria and her 16 year old brother, Giuseppe, had finally completed their voyage to the United States from the Italian town of Palermo. After disembarking from the cramped and unsanitary quarters of the steamship, they wearily endured the endless lines and official inspections of the Ellis Island immigrant processing stations. With the successful end of the first phase of their “journey of tears,” they began the next phase of social and cultural adaptation within the more comfortable boundaries of Little Italy. New national and social class identities overlapped with familiar identities of region, village, and kin. Within a few months, Annamaria found a job in the garment industry as a seamstress and, over the next seven years, lived, worked and got married within the socio-economic boundaries of the ethnic enclave of Little Italy. Seven years later, Annamaria and her husband, Gianni, moved to the suburb of Ozone Park in Long Island where they spent the rest of their working careers. Today, Annamaria lives with her widowed daughter, Gloria, and her husband of seventy-two years in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Sterling, Virginia.

Nearly 70 years later, a much different pattern of immigration began. In January 1989, Chiara left the Italian town of Agrigento and arrived in Dulles International Airport, Northern Virginia. She came to the Washington D.C. metropolitan area to visit some distant relatives and to study English. With a postgraduate education and job experience in the public sector, she did not come to the United States with the expectation of a long-term residence. However, she soon met her eventual husband Doug, a Jewish-American, and decided to live in Washington, D.C. Today, they live in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, D.C., a multi-ethnic, multi-class community that is currently experiencing intense gentrification pressures from white, high-income, professionals.

The experiences of Annamaria and Chiara are emblematic of the changing immigrant experience from the Great Immigration waves of the turn of the century and the post-1965 immigration flows. On the one hand,

* The author wishes to thank Ms. Catherine Isaacs for the assistance and personal support offered while the data were collected. A special thanks to Robert D. Manning for his priceless insights and carefully reading this paper. Finally, the author wishes to express her gratitude to her parents, Francesco and Cettina.
both Annamaria and Chiara shared the initial discomfort of living in a foreign culture. On the other hand, their racial/ethnic identities are sharply divergent. While Annamaria describes her heritage as White/Caucasian Italian-American, Chiara refuses to accept such a simplistic and exclusive classification. As it will be shown, the different identities of Annamaria and Chiara can be explained by the changes created by the postindustrial economy that have profoundly shaped their residential patterns, whom they interact with, and how they selectively accept and resist ethnic and racial categorizations.

This article explores the complex role that the social geography of space plays in forging individual perceptions of race/ethnicity and self-identity. Specifically, it argues that the degree of convergence or overlap of multiple social dimensions of residence, work, and leisure (such as the case of the ethnic enclave at the turn of the century) promotes a perception of race/ethnic relations as conflictual and a self identity primarily based on the American mainstream or “Assimilationist” approach to race/ethnicity. In comparison to the convergent social dimensions that characterize the urban ethnic enclave, the diffuse spatial articulation of residence, work, and leisure activities, which has emerged from the contemporary postindustrial metropolis, fosters a perception of race/ethnic relations as less conflictual and individualistic through the process of adapting to the dominant society (Americanization) versus a group identity most closely associated with social class.

ASSIMILATION, PLURALISM, AND MULTICULTURALISM: HOW SOCIETY DEFINES WHO WE ARE

The commonly accepted vision of American society is that of a country of immigrants. Besides the few survivors of the genocide of Native Americans, the family roots of every American can be traced to another country. This includes the English escaping religious wars, the Jews escaping violent pogroms in Europe, the African survivors of the slave trade, the Chilean dissidents who escaped the totalitarian regime of Pinochet, or the Chinese refugees from the Tannaman Square demonstrations. This view of the United States as a country of immigrants is so deeply rooted in the U.S.

1 Chiara emphatically proclaims that “I do not like Italian-Americans. They want to teach me what does it mean to be Italian, and yet they have never lived in Italy or interacted with real Italians. . . . I find their vision of Italy very offensive and, at the same time, I feel sorry for what America did to them.” Interview with Chiara, Washington, D.C. (Apr. 1997 and Sept. 1997).

consciousness that most Americans describe themselves with secondary identities; the so-called "hyphenated" Americans: Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and even Muslim-Americans. This multiple identity serves the need to rank socially distinct racial/ethnic groups while maintaining a class based stratification system at the individual level.

A society stratified along racial/ethnic cleavages promotes an apparently contradictory phenomenon, a form of horizontal stratification. Individuals of the same general social position (education, occupation, and income) are equal from a class perspective and, at the same time, can be rank-ordered from a race/ethnic minority relation's perspective. They share horizontally situated, structural positions as members of the same social class. As members of distinct, socially constructed racial/ethnic groups, however, they are distinguished along a cross-cutting, vertical axis as members of socially defined racial/ethnic groups. In other words, individual members of the same social class are stratified according to the societal ranking of their respective race/ethnic identity.

In order for a stratification system based on racial/ethnic distinctions to be stable, individuals must believe that as members of a racial/ethnic group they are intrinsically different from members of another group. Otherwise, individuals sharing the same class background, but from different race/ethnic groups, would not be opposed to collaborative political activities. This could foster potentially revolutionary alliances among members of different race/ethnic groups whose shared class position could produce transformative social change for all members of collaborating groups rather than favored individuals. Hence, the socially and politically defined process of racial/ethnic identity formation is of crucial importance.

In the process of racial/ethnic identity formation, the social geography of space plays a crucial role both at the individual/micro and group/macro levels. At the macro level, the manipulation of the use and exchange value of social space reinforces loyalty to the political/economic system by

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3 See generally Oliver C. Cox, Caste, Race and Race, (Doubleday & Company 1948).

4 This paper approaches urban space as both a commodity (space economically defined) and the social vortex of personal space (residence) where to live and conduct business (space socially defined). As a commodity, urban space has an exchange value while, as the natural space where to live and conduct business, it has a use value associated with community, services, and jobs. This dual role of urban space creates conflict between the economic and political elites, whose interest is to generate wealth by promoting urban growth, and local communities, whose interest is to preserve their communities. See generally John R. Logan and Harvey L.
favoring specific racial/ethnic groups (alias, those for whom the "system works") and disadvantaging others. By associating privileged and disadvantaged groups with specific spatial locations, social inequality is viewed as a natural result of a group's specific attributes. At the same time, at the micro level, space offers a visual representation of differences and presumed uniqueness of certain racial/ethnic groups and, accordingly, it reinforces the social construction of racial/ethnic stereotypes and the hierarchical ranking of "us" versus "them." It is only by denying individuality to the members of socially defined racial/ethnic groups that they are perceived as unique and different from other groups. Thus, the societal belief in group differences becomes a necessary precondition for racism to become an integrative component of intrinsically conflictual societies.

The Assimilationist, Cultural Pluralist and Multicultural approaches, while addressing the issues of racial/ethnic relations in the U.S., tend to neglect the role of space in defining the social construction of race/ethnic identity and its role in mediating social class conflict. The Assimilationist paradigm views race/ethnicity as socially unique membership categories with group specific endowments and attributes. Accordingly, American society is viewed as a "melting pot" where the different racial/ethnic groups add some unique social characteristics but do not alter the mainstream cultural values. Different racial/ethnic groups voluntarily conform to the mainstream values through the assimilation process and, in time, distinct differences are eventually absorbed and disappear over time. In other words, according to this tradition, we will become like them or they will become like us through the two-stage process of structural assimilation (integration such as employment, political participation) and cultural assimilation (language, religion, clothing).

By assuming that assimilation is a voluntary and inevitable phenomenon, the Assimilation model preserves and, at the same time, exalts

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5 As correctly stated by Reed, a life long resident of the Washington metropolitan area, "Yes, I do have prejudices... They made me this way when I was separated from my street childhood friends and I went to a segregated school system. Since then, my only relation with my African-Americans childhood's friends was who was able to throw the ice-picks further away." Interview with Reed, Reston, Va. (Mar. 1998).
the superiority of the mainstream culture of the host country. It is only by embracing the dominant values of the receiving country that new immigrant groups are able to successfully achieve the "American Dream." Accordingly, the permanence of poverty is viewed not as the outcome of the unequal distribution of opportunities among different racial/ethnic groups, but the consequence of the inability of some individuals to embrace the "winning" cultural values which are, by extension, superior to the cultures of the sending societies and difficult to acquire.

The Assimilation model assumes a social system characterized by equal access to key resources (education, housing, employment) and an open stratification system that allows any individual who embraces the winning mainstream values (hard work, perseverance and self-reliance) to succeed. Additionally, it implies a close spatial fit between home and work, as well as, that residential mobility follows the social and economic assimilation of the individuals. Furthermore, the Assimilation model assumes that race and ethnicity are expressions of the unique cultural and biological endowments and, as such, are neither socially defined nor mutable. However, minorities can voluntarily embrace those cultural traits that allow for succeeding in America. Accordingly, this model implies that the different groups will progressively assume the dominant (superior), mainstream cultural values while maintaining their unique biological and cultural endowments. In this sense, Assimilation assumes that we can not change who we are as members of distinct other groups so long as attachments to backward cultural values lead minorities to live in self-enclosed, ethnic neighborhoods which limit their ability to melt into the mainstream of society.

The political outcome is to imply the innate uniqueness of each group and the crucial role that race/ethnicity plays in shaping the group and, therefore, individual identity. In other words, from the Assimilationist perspective, we are born who we are because our cultural endowments (race/ethnicity) are predestined at birth. At the same time, this approach reinforces the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon model since it implies that non-Anglo groups must embrace Anglo-Saxon cultural values to successfully

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6 As stated by Maurizio, a Jewish Italian who chose to leave the U.S. seven years after his arrival echoes this position. "All of my life I thought I was Italian. Then, I came to this country and discovered that I am Jewish and White. . . I never thought of myself as a Jew just because I go to a Synagogue instead than a Church. . . The strange thing is that, after America, I do not look at my friends as friends, but as my Catholic friends and my Jewish friends. . . I have to get out of here. This country is making me a racist. . . Italy is not heaven but there they do not make you a racist. . . Racism is deeply rooted in U.S. society and I can not take it any longer." Interview with Maurizio, Washington, D.C. (May 1996).
compete in America. Consequently, conflict and discrimination are temporary societal features of intergroup relations that will disappear as soon as non-Anglo groups embrace the mainstream values and abandon their self-isolation (work, residence, religious activities) while seeking to minimize the unique endowments of their respective racial/ethnic groups.

A major criticism of this model is that, by assuming that race and ethnicity are unique features of each group, it overlooks the process of how society defines who we are and the role that social class has in framing the mainstream perception of race/ethnicity, as well as, self-identity. In fact, a major finding of the author’s fieldwork is that social class has a crucial role in framing the mainstream definition of race/ethnicity. In addition, the Assimilation model ignores that race/ethnicity are historically defined and are not static and unchangeable; it assumes a process that is inexorable and inherently linear in its progression. Finally, the Assimilation model endorses racism by ignoring the different structural opportunities given to different individuals on the base of their race/ethnicity. Since Assimilation assumes equal access to key resources, the fact that a large percentage of members of non-White groups are relegated to lower strata positions in society demonstrates that these groups have some unique endowments that limit their ability to successfully participate in the social mainstream. Hence, the failure to adapt to a superior cultural system differentiates these groups as implicitly different and inferior to us.

The Cultural Pluralist model promotes a definition of race/ethnicity as the expression of the unique endowments of different groups. However, it challenges the assumption of voluntarily assimilation, its inevitable and inherently linear dynamics, while shifting the unit of analysis from the individual to the group. According to this approach, the different racial/ethnic groups do not melt with each other, but retain their cultural practices and identity. As new immigrant groups enter the U.S., instead of embracing assimilation in American society, they consciously seek to maintain their group identity while, as distinct groups, they participate in the larger national socio/political/economic system. In other words, rather than a “melting pot,” the Cultural Pluralist approach sees U.S. society as a mosaic of different racial/ethnic groups struggling to compete for scarce societal resources, within their explicitly defined territorial boundaries of the ethnic community.

From the Cultural Pluralist perspective, intergroup (racial/ethnic) relations should focus on the distinct characteristics of each racial/ethnic group, its unique history in contra-distinction to other groups, and the strategies that the group develops to achieve socio-economic mobility in America as exemplified by the socially integrated economy of the “ethnic enclave.” As the group prospers, the suburban ethnic enclave that emerges
from the different structural opportunities of the postindustrial economy often replaces the urban enclave of the turn of the century. However, by focusing on the group strategy for upward mobility, the Cultural Pluralist model creates a new hierarchy of racial/ethnic groups as defined by the group that occupies the focus of the analysis.

This ranking of racial/ethnic groups, based on ethnocentric stereotypes, can reinforce racism by endorsing an ideology of us against them. For example, a focus on the African-American experience may result in an Afrocentric perspective replacing a Eurocentric point of view. Although based on a different point of reference, it does not necessarily offer an inherently better or worse analytical framework; it is simply a different viewpoint. Indeed, what is missing is an integrated understanding and multidisciplinary analysis of the factors that underlie the experiences of all groups that comprise a society at a specific historical moment as well as the historical process of forming race/ethnic identity or ethnogenesis. By focusing on the uniqueness of each racial/ethnic group, Cultural Pluralism can paradoxically reinforce racial/ethnic motivated conflict. A hierarchy of different racial/ethnic groups is in turn promoted that emphasizes the undesirable features of other groups: Irish as “drinkers,” Italians as “mafiosi,” African Americans as “lazy,” Jewish-Americans as “business-oriented,” Asian Americans as “clannish,” and Latinos as “emotional.” Hence, it can be argued that Cultural Pluralism exacerbates intergroup tensions by promoting the ideology of “you are either with us or you are against us” by assuming the primacy of one’s racial/ethnic group vis-a-vis all others.

In addition, Cultural Pluralism ignores that, as socially defined categories, race/ethnic categories are not static; rather, they vary overtime in both the host and the sending country. Immigrants of the same racial/ethnic group may bring with them not only different perceptions of who they are (self identity), but also individual endowments (human capital, wealth) that shapes their reception in their respective host societies (social class position). In other words, the racial/ethnic identity and social-class background of a contemporary African or Italian immigrant is not the same as that of an immigrant of the turn of the century because contemporary Italy and Africa are not the same societies in comparison to a century ago. Accordingly, contemporary African and Italian immigrants do not identify with the U.S. mainstream definition of African-Americans and Italian-Americans because their social class background is different from the American mainstream definition of “African-American” and “Italian-American.” Thus, Cultural Pluralism is unable to offer a theoretical framework to discern how society defines what is White versus non-White and how, within the White and non-White group, the shadows of the rainbow are redefined and the sources of these changing definitions over time.
Finally, Cultural Pluralism ignores the reality that a growing percentage of middle class immigrants are more likely to embrace social class over their race/ethnic identity. This statement is supported by the observation that a growing proportion of contemporary immigrants to the U.S., when given a choice, prefer to settle in a race/ethnic heterogeneous neighborhood that shares a common social class status rather than concentrate in an ethnically homogeneous, suburban ethnic enclave. The ability of individual immigrant households to attain socio-economic mobility underlies the departure of the most “successful” from their original racial/ethnic communities and the rise of multi-ethnic neighborhoods in the metropolitan suburbs. Hence, the Cultural Pluralist model, with its emphasis on the group’s shared experience and strategies to achieve upper mobility, is not able to offer a valid theoretical explanation to this phenomenon.

The Multicultural approach challenges not only the assumption of inevitable assimilation, but also the linear pattern of socio-cultural adaptation (from backward to modern) that underlies the race/ethnic hierarchy implied by Pluralism. From the Multicultural approach, each racial/ethnic group gives its specific and unique contribution to the ongoing evolution of the larger national culture. There is no implicit assumption of superior/inferior cultures and/or racial/ethnic groups. In this sense, the contributions of the specific groups to the national societal “mosaic” is greater than the sum of its individual racial/ethnic components; the theoretical focus is the shared experience of being American. For instance, it is necessary to recognize the historical exclusion of Asian immigrants in the early twentieth century in order to understand the reception of mass immigration from Mexico during World War I. However, like the Assimilationist and Cultural Pluralist models, Multiculturalist scholars have neglected the role of space in shaping the fluid definitions of race and ethnicity in postindustrial societies.

Second, while recognizing that assimilation is not necessarily a spontaneous and unavoidable process, Multiculturalism does not discern that resisting assimilation can be the outcome of the persistence of racial/ethnic discrimination in the host country or tangibly “rational” economic factors that encourage self-segregation and group isolation from the cultural mainstream. For example, the “Return to Africa” movement of the early twentieth century or, more recently, the choice of some immigrants not to live in the ethnic enclave can be a conscious response to racism and denial of structural opportunities in the mainstream society. Thus, by focusing on the shared experience of being American, Multiculturalism does not fully explain the role that structural barriers and racism have in shaping the wide range of experiences that define becoming “American.”

Third, while denying any implicit or explicit racial/ethnic superiority, Multiculturalism implies the existence of objective differences among
different racial/ethnic groups, which ignores that characteristics associated with differences are socially defined. In a sense, by ignoring the socially defined process by which variation in group attributes is interpreted and redefined, Multiculturalism completely ignores the socially defined process of racial/ethnic identity formation both at the individual and group levels. In other words, Multiculturalism conveniently ignores the role that race/ethnicity plays in promoting social stratification and inequality. Accordingly, it can be argued that Multiculturalism endorses the ideology of they are, after all, like us and ignores the analysis of the socio-politico-economic forces that define them versus us as well as the role that the definition of the other has in promoting social stability by redefining social class conflict along race/ethnic lines.

Under the mask of “political correctness” and “identity politics,” racial/ethnic animosities can be reinforced as different groups are forced to compete for the allocation of scarce resources rather than create a coalition for a more equitable redistribution of scarce economic resources. This last observation is supported by the resurgence of urban conflict among racial/ethnic minorities living in the inner city. As stated by Gloria, a Virginia resident, “They are using equal opportunity to build walls in between us. Everybody wants to be a minority to be able to enjoy a comfortable life.”

This last point must not be understated since it can lead to a subtle (and perverse) manipulation of racial/ethnic tolerance and cultural diversity to shape the outcome of class conflict. By promoting racial/ethnic tolerance, Multiculturalism tends to undervalue the fact that what defines “them” and “us,” is not only ethnic/racial identity but also social class experiences. Accordingly, the danger implied by Multiculturalism is that the supposed tolerance towards diversity could be used by the socio-politico-economic élites to portray class divisions as racial/ethnic tensions. The lived experiences of cultural identity can, indeed, be used to avoid the structural integration of new immigrants by denying full participation in the mainstream culture. Thus, without presenting socio/economic factors in the center of the analysis of race/ethnic relations in America, the Multiculturalist approach can be manipulated to deflect attention from the growing economic inequality of the postindustrial economy. And, in the popular culture, it can be portrayed as merely an excursion in the exotic (dining at an ethnic restaurant or wearing ethnic clothing) to discover that, after all, they are just like us. Without a deeper understanding of the class struggles that fundamentally shape race/ethnic relations in America, the Multiculturalist approach could become the contemporary example of the old Chinese saying:

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7 Interview with Gloria, Sterling, Va. (Mar. 1998).
"Man tamed the cat [of race/ethnicity] so that he could ride the tiger [of social class conflict.]"

The Social Geography of Work, Living, and Leisure: How Postindustrial Society Shapes Who We Are

Refining a theoretical framework for understanding racial/ethnic relations in post-industrial America is a daunting task, in spite of the enormous research literature on the topic. This is demonstrated by the inability of the Assimilation, Cultural Pluralist and Multicultural models to offer a satisfying analysis of the process of racial/ethnic identity, race/ethnic relations and the role of race/ethnic divisions in promoting social stability. Indeed, each of these approaches offers only a partial explanation of U.S. racial/ethnic relations and, in the process, understates the role of social class in shaping the experiences of each racial/ethnic group.

This article argues that the key to understanding the dynamics of racial/ethnic relations in America is the role of social class in the rapidly changing structural opportunities provided by the postindustrial society, especially urban versus suburban residence. More specifically, mainstream America confounds patterns that are associated with specific racial/ethnic groups when in reality they are social class characteristics. For example the traditional definition of Italian or Irish or Polish is based on behavioral and cultural characteristics of working class individuals who migrated to America from Italy or Ireland or Poland at the turn of the century. This view assumes the homogeneity of these groups upon their arrival to the United States, while the success of individual immigrants is attributed to their talent and determination to assimilate.

Second, the socio-spatial experience of the different racial/ethnic groups and immigrants must be analyzed because it frames both individuals’ self-identity and the definition of them versus us. In general, the spatial overlap of living, working and leisure space leads to an apparently contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, the newcomers embrace the mainstream definition of us. On the other hand, they resist the mainstream definition of us by developing a racist and discriminatory attitude towards

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8 For example, George, who was born in the Philadelphia suburb of Allentown during the late 1920s and has always lived in suburbs, has gone through life with almost no interaction with racial/ethnic minorities. He does not have consciousness of being prejudicial and knows of "a racial problem in America because my friend talk about and. . . I was in Washington during the 1968 riots. . . I did not understand why they [African-Americans] were destroying their own houses. . . we [whites] were living in the suburbs and our houses were not touched by the riots."

those racial/ethnic groups that the mainstream society defines as inferior. This phenomenon, which is particularly evident among immigrants of a higher social class background, seems to be the outcome of the inability of the new comers to find a place where they can interact with individuals they identify with. In other words, when denied spatial mobility, immigrants are forced in close proximity to individuals with whom they may have nothing in common, except the U.S. mainstream definition of race/ethnicity. Consequently, the self-identity of these individuals is transformed and the mainstream definition of race/ethnicity becomes the main, sometimes the only, commonality between the individuals sharing the same space. Accordingly, a self identity based on the U.S. mainstream definition of race/ethnicity is created and, at the same time, prejudices create a new uniqueness based no longer on the identity the immigrants had in their country, but on definitions of race/ethnicity that are learned in the U.S. For instance, Middle Eastern immigrants "learn" that the process of "Americanization" includes embracing racist attitudes toward African-Americans, often without any direct experiences with native-born African-Americans in the United States.

As previously explained, the convergence of social and geographic space (work, residence, and leisure) helps to forge, at the individual level, a mainstream definition of "them" and "us." At the same time the desire to be like the superior "other" is reinforced by the perception of spatial difference from the inferior social "other." In this sense, it could be argued that the close spatial fit of the urban enclave of the turn of the century was a key factor in forging a mainstream racial/ethnic identity while mediating the rise of class-consciousness across different racial/ethnic groups. In fact, class differences were minimized by the forced cohabitation of individuals belonging to the same racial/ethnic group and the assimilation of the individual was achieved through the imposition of a mainstream racial/ethnic identity, which, in most cases, was created immediately after the individual's arrival in America. For example, Sicilians learned that they were Italians only after they arrived in America and shared the same forms of discrimination that were suffered by other immigrants from mainland Italy.

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9 Changing one's look and becoming whiter has been a constant characteristic of the American social definition of beauty, as demonstrated by the cosmetic industry focus on straightening African-American hair or lightening the hair and skin complexion of Southern European immigrants. Even today, most second and third generation Italian immigrants are proud of the blue eyes and blond hair of their grandchildren and are surprised when faced with the information that, at the turn of the century, Southern Italians were "classed somewhere [in] between the White Men and Negroes." Peter Vellon, Black, White or in Between?, AMBASSADOR, Fall 2000, at 10-13.
This reinforced the overlap between race/ethnicity and social class, which is one of the main characteristics of race/ethnic relations in America prior to 1965.

In pre-1965 American society, various socially defined racial/ethnic groups were relegated to specific segments of the U.S. labor market. In order to defuse potentially widespread social unrest, mainstream America focused on the racial/ethnic identities of the participants when, in reality, they were expressing behavioral characteristics of a social class that were restricted to undesirable jobs and labor market sectors. In other words, the American stratification system was able to disguise problematic social class differences as the "natural" outcome of racial/ethnic behavioral characteristics. Accordingly, immigrants who wanted to achieve social mobility were expected to transcend their race/ethnic group and, in a sense, become White as demonstrated by their individual socio-economic success. As a result, social class conflicts were presented as racial/ethnic tensions; minorities needed more education in order to better compete and escape their disadvantaged backgrounds.

In post-1965 American society, with a growing number of immigrants from middle and upper social classes (due to military-political conflicts and globalization of production activities), the previous convergence of race/ethnicity and social class is declining. At the same time, with the decline of the urban core as the center of economic activities and residential life, a growing proportion of native minorities and immigrants are enjoying the new choices of where to live, work and spend their leisure time. Not incidentally, they also are resisting the traditional categories of race/ethnic identities. As they share the same social "space" with more diverse populations, social class is increasingly becoming the primary component of self identity, especially in a mobility oriented society (such as American society) where one is encouraged to "overcome" past disadvantages. Consequently, the dynamics of race/ethnic relations in America are experiencing a profound challenge to previous assumptions and definitions. In fact, the emerging racial/ethnic tensions are within different sectors of the same racial/ethnic group (such as Italians and Italian-Americans, Africans and African-Americans, Cubans and Chicanos), between racial/ethnic minority groups (such as Latinos/Hispanic and African-Americans) and between White and non-White (such as Anglo-Saxon/White and all people of color). For the first time in American history, the ascendance of a global, postindustrial economy is requiring a fundamental transformation of race/ethnic relations. That is, the colonialist ideology of a racial/ethnic hierarchy is no longer sufficient for maintaining a stable stratification system. In its place, an individualistic, meritocratic ideology of social class superiority is supplanting race/ethnicity as the main justification for social inequality.
The implications of these trends are crucial to understanding the future of racial/ethnic relations in the United States. In fact, with the emergence of social class as one of the most salient factors in shaping contemporary self identity and racial/ethnic relations in America, it is possible that the next crisis in the reproduction of Capitalist relations will be social rather than economic relations. For the first time in American history, social class and race/ethnic identities are no longer convergent. Accordingly, as levels of poverty increase among all racial/ethnic groups and, in particular among the declining White majority, race/ethnicity can no longer be used to deflect attention from social conflicts that are due to economic (social class) issues.

**The Way We Were: Racial/Ethnic Identity and The Spatial Divergence of Postindustrial Society**

One of the most revealing findings of the fieldwork, that is the evidentiary basis of this article, is that mainstream America tends to present as racial/ethnic features what, in reality, are more accurately understood as social class characteristics. In addition, spatial arrangements of the postindustrial society are playing a crucial role in forging one’s self-identity. Specifically, individuals whose socialization is characterized by a close spatial fit among living, working and leisure spaces, base their self-identity primarily on the mainstream definition of race/ethnicity. In addition, this spatial convergence fosters the perception of racial/ethnic relations as fraught with conflict and the acceptance of prejudicial attitudes. On the contrary, social class seems to be the predominant component of self-identity among individuals whose socialization is characterized by a loose spatial fit among living, working and leisure spaces. These individuals see race/ethnic relations as less conflictual and, on average, tend to have less prejudice. The life experience of Annamaria and her daughter Gloria illustrates these observations.

Annamaria is an atypical immigrant for the beginning of the twentieth century because her social class background is much higher than the majority of Italian immigrants who came to America during the Great Immigration. At a time when illiteracy was the norm for the wide majority of the Italian population, both of her parents attended school and enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. Annamaria’s father owned a medium size farm (mostly vineyards and wheat) and her mother operated a small store. Her elevated social class background makes her experience particularly instructive in understanding the role of close spatial fit in influencing individual
identity because, when she came to America, her social class was the primary factor in shaping her personal experiences and life choices.\textsuperscript{10}

Annamaria was born in 1902 in Palermo. Her childhood memories are marked by the loving memories of her parents, by her family’s wealth, and the discomfort of being a woman in Sicily at the beginning of the century. When Annamaria and her brother Giuseppe arrived at Ellis Island in 1921, she recalls their determination of not wanting to return to Italy and the discomfort of living with people “who were Italian like me but not exactly like me.” She recalls that “I did not want to go home and admit that I was wrong [in leaving my family], I needed to find a job to send money at home. . . No, my family did not need my money, I needed to send the money to them because I wanted to show my father that I was doing fine and I was happier in America than in Sicily.”\textsuperscript{11}

An avid reader, Annamaria soon became fluent in English and, at the age of 26, married Gianni, an Italian-American she met at a party. She still vividly recalls her wedding day and, especially, the importance of having good pictures to send back to Italy to show her father and relatives her new wealth in America. Two years later, Annamaria and Gianni decided to leave the city and commute to work from Ozone Park, a suburb of Long Island. Annamaria recalls that the decision to move was mostly based on her discomfort of living in Little Italy. As she recalls,

“We [Annamaria and other Italians] did not speak the same language, nor had the same education and yet they believed that they were superior to me just because they were Polentoni [derogatory term used by Southern Italians to indicate Northern Italians]. I could not deal with that kind of discrimination and, since I had the [economic] means to do it, I left. I paid a high personal price for my choices. . . I was not in Italy when my parents died, when the War [World War II] started, and I had to give up the privileges I had in Italy. Do I want to go back in time? That is not a

\textsuperscript{10} Annamaria recalls that, as a child, her identity was based on her family name. “When I used to meet people, the first thing they asked me was who was my father. . . They replied baciiamo le mani [We kiss your hands] as a sign of respect. I was proud of my father and family. . . I was not Italian, I was the daughter of Don Francesco and I was proud of it.” It should be noted that, at the time, family and social class was concomitant. Therefore, belonging to a respected family implied belonging to a family that was educated, had no financial problems and had political power in town. Interview with Annamaria, Sterling, Va. (May 1998).

\textsuperscript{11} See id.
fair question, I am 96 years old and this is my country. I am American.”

What emerges from these comments is an understanding of the high personal cost necessary “to make it in America.” More intriguing is the surprise of Annamaria that she was treated the same as individuals that she still believes had nothing in common with her, except for the geography of birth. In fact, Annamaria admits that she became Italian only after she came to the U.S.

“[Before coming to America] I did not know that I was Italian. I was the daughter of Don Francesco. To me, everybody was Italian. [In Italy], I was different from other Italians because I was able to dress well and my mother had a lady to help her with the heavy house chores. When I was a child, I never thought that one day I would have worked so close with individuals so different from me. They were cafoni [derogatory term for day workers] and ignoranti [illiterate]. Now, that I was in America I had to become their friend. I had to become like them.”

For Annamaria, becoming “like them” meant to overcome her privileged class background and develop a new identity based on the shared experiences of ethnicity in the United States. At the same time, Annamaria’s newly discovered ethnic identity allowed her to maintain her “uniqueness” by disassociating and feeling superior from non-Italian groups. As an Italian, she was able to enjoy certain privileges within the social boundaries of the ethnic enclave (e.g., buying with credit, discounts at stores, speaking her native language when feeling lonely). In addition, Annamaria’s new identity offered privileges in the mainstream society. For instance, she was able to obtain a better-paid job than African-Americans merely because she was “White.” Over time, Annamaria’s social class identity became subsumed within her ethnic identity,

“I realized that in America we all have to work and you are who you are, not [based on] your family’s status... If you want to understand how America works, remember that [in the U.S.] you are where you come from and how blond is your hair. Northern Italians believe that they are superior to Sicilians just because they are lighter. However, my mother’s complexion was come il latte [as white as milk]

12 See id.
13 See id.
Americans do not know anything about Sicily and they believe they know everything. I did not teach Italian to my daughters because they are Americans, they are Whites and they can have what was denied to me... Yes, I guess that you are right, I was denied the opportunity to enjoy the same [social class] privileges that I had in Italy. My daughters can be both middle-class and American.”

What is shown by Annamaria’s experience during the industrial epoch is that close spatial fit (work, residence, and leisure) facilitated the creation of a self identity that is primarily based on race/ethnicity, even among immigrants who arrived with a strong social class identity. In addition, it increases racial/ethnic prejudice by enforcing social boundaries and increasing group isolation. Although Annamaria does not admit that she has prejudices, her discriminatory attitudes toward non-White and non-Italian groups are almost immediately evident. For example, she does not like African-Americans and seeks to minimize contacts with them. Furthermore, although she loved her son-in-law “because he was a gentleman,” Annamaria openly admits that the marriage of her daughter to “a Jewish man was a major disappointment.”

Comparing her attitudes with those of her mother Viviana, who never left Italy, supports the argument that Annamaria developed prejudices only after coming to America and living within the clearly defined spatial boundaries of the urban ethnic enclave of Little Italy. Gloria, Annamaria’s daughter, remembers that, when she married her husband, her mother’s reaction was “how I am going to tell to your grandmother that you married a Jewish man.” Instead, my grandmother said, “does he believe in God? Is he una buona persona [a good person]? If so, what is the problem? I remember that I felt vindicated.”

For Annamaria, distinguishing between una buona e una cattiva persona (a good and a bad person) entailed finding a person with a good education, good manners, and a good job. In other words, the fundamental difference was social class rather than race/ethnicity. On the contrary, for Annamaria, this difference is defined according to racial and ethnic group distinctions: Whites versus non-Whites, Italians versus non-Italians, and Northern versus Southern Italians. By the time Annamaria moved from Little Italy to Ozone Park, social class had disappeared from the identity of the

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14 See id.
15 See id.
19 year old girl who had left Italy wearing the symbols of her social class: "a hat, gloves, and silk stockings."  

As previously discussed, the most significant aspect of Annamaria's life experience is the primary role of spatial convergence (primary social dimensions of work, residence, and leisure) in forging an American identity that is mostly based on ethnicity. In comparison, when Annamaria came to America, her identity was primarily based on the social class of her family. It was her inability to choose where to live, work, and spend leisure time that reshaped her individual identity in the U.S. When she came to America in 1921, she was proud to be the "daughter of Don Francesco." Today, Annamaria identifies herself as a "White-Caucasian, Italian-American." This ascension of race/ethnicity over social class identity is crucial in promoting a stratification system that rewards the individual over the group and promotes discrimination based on social and cultural characteristics, rather than struggles over the politics of production and distribution of wealth. It is only if individuals believe that as members of socially defined racial/ethnic groups that she/he is intrinsically different from others and therefore will accept a social status that reflects his/her race/ethnic group's past achievements. Therefore, space plays a crucial role in promoting race/ethnic stratification because it is a fundamental element in framing a self identity that is primarily based on the mainstream definition of race/ethnicity and reinforcing the "natural" relationship between race/ethnicity and social class.

The experience of Gloria, eldest daughter of Annamaria and Gianni, illustrates how spatial fragmentation (in contrast to historical patterns of spatial overlap), profoundly influences personal identity largely along the social axis of class background. This is because individuals within the same racial/ethnic group can be differentiated (social class cleavages), as well as, individuals from a similar social class background but from different racial/ethnic groups. In addition, spatial incongruence can, in some situations, serve to mitigate discriminatory attitudes toward different minority groups.

Gloria was born during the depths of the Great Depression in 1930 and grew up in Ozone Park. The prejudiced attitudes of her mother and extended family as well as the stigma of her Italian heritage profoundly shaped Gloria's childhood experiences. Her early memories paint a portrait of a town without non-White minorities and where personal contacts with individuals belonging to different racial/ethnic groups were sporadic and distant. As Gloria explains her experiences with cultural diversity:

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17 Interview with Annamaria, Sterling, Va. (May 1998).
18 See id.
"[W]ell, not what you call minorities [today]. Whites, mostly Italians, primarily inhabited Ozone Park. I was never really exposed to different races. To me, the Asians were laundresses, except maybe for some Chinese restaurants I used to go with my friends. In college, there was only one African-American student. Interestingly for me, her father was a doctor. I realized that there were more [ethnic] groups than just Italians and that was my answer [to race]. My friendship with [an African American classmate] concerned my mother, but we still became friends."

Although Gloria does not remember overt prejudice in the relatively homogeneous environment of Ozone Park, she was fully aware of discrimination against Italians. According to Gloria, "What was the attitude toward Italians [outside of my neighborhood]? Horrible! I was ashamed of being Italian. My name associated me with the Mafia. [As a child], I did not want to be Italian, I wanted to be American." Gloria clearly remembers that racism was the norm of minority relations in America,

"At that time, there were not what you would describe as bad [racial/ethnic] relations, there were no relations at all. Blacks stayed with Blacks and Whites with Whites. There were Irish, but you did not associate with them because, so far as Italians were concerned, the Irish were all drunks... You did not associate with African-Americans because [cordial relations with them] were seen as lowering yourself. The Irish did not associate with Italians because [to them] Italians were all members of the Mafia. [As for African-Americans,] I do not know, they were living outside the neighborhood. They were protected against us and we were protected against them... Why were Italians racists if they were discriminated against by other groups? It was ignorance. They came [from Italy] and were put in a community where everyone was Italian. There was the Mafia, but the Mafia never affected them personally, it was good to them, it helped them. For Italians, there was pride in being a member of the Mafia, because the Mafia was helping the neighborhood. I used to go to the city to visit friends and found that Little Italy was different from Ozone Park... People were wealthier in Ozone Park. They had lived in America for a longer time or were born there. For

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them [residents of Ozone Park], the Mafia was not [an organization] to be proud of. They just did not talk about it.”

These remarks underscore the strong relationship between social class and race/ethnicity during the industrial epoch. For Gloria, individuals from different classes were defined by their occupation/education outside of the ethnic enclave. In fact, she was surprised to discover that in the “melting pot” mainstream, an African-American could become a medical doctor. At the same time, Gloria recognized that she was different from Italians living in Little Italy. She knew that her ethnic heritage was not the source of her unique identity; Gloria did not share the same experiences as Italians living in an urban enclave due to her higher social class. In fact, she even established a friendship with an African-American woman from an upper middle class background, even against the protestations of her mother. This increasing spatial incongruence allowed Gloria to sever her social ties with the Italian-Americans of Little Italy. In contrast to her mother, for whom becoming American entailed discovering an Italian identity, becoming American to Gloria meant surmounting her ethnic heritage and embracing a self-identity primarily based on her middle class status.

While attending college, Gloria met her husband, “a German, Hungarian, English, Jewish-American.” Their relationship was so intensely criticized by both families that they decided to secretly marry and announce the decision to their families only after their nuptials. Immediately after the civil ceremony, Gloria and her husband moved to the Bronx, a borough of New York City, in order to reduce their commute by public transportation. During this period of rapid suburbanization, one of her husband’s colleagues described an affordable housing development that was under construction: Levittown. In August of 1959, Gloria and her growing family of six daughters moved to a house in Levittown where they lived for seven years. This planned residential community featured one-income households where women were primarily housewives and men shared their neighbors’ automobiles while car-pooling to work in New York City. Hence, Gloria again found her “American Dream” situated in a socially homogeneous, middle class suburb. Gloria recalls that Levittown was a strictly “White” community, “I never saw minorities living there. Everybody was White [although] there were different ethnicity. I remember two Irish families, a Jewish family, and a WASP family . . . [but] no foreign [families].”

In 1966, after the passage of the Civil Rights Voting Act, Gloria and her fam-

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20 See id.
21 See id.
ily moved further out to the town called Head of the Harbor. It was an older community that had been absorbed by the expansion of the New York Metropolitan Area.

When her husband started to work for a Chicago based company, Gloria and her family moved to Oaktown, Virginia. She recalls that the decision was mostly based on the proximity to two major airports, "so my husband could travel for work" and the reputation of the public school system in the area. "We were looking for a nice place to raise a family. Good public schools were the most important factor, but also a big house and a nice neighborhood [with no crime]." Following her husband's death and a temporary return to the New York Metropolitan Area, Gloria has been living in a Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C. since the early 1970s. Specifically, she lived in the suburban community of Vienna until the early 1980s and then moved further away from Washington, D.C., to the town of Reston. Today, Gloria lives in Sterling with her parents and is very busy with her nineteen grandchildren, six daughters and activities in a non-denominational church.

Like a growing proportion of white, middle class Americans, Gloria has progressively disassociated herself from the communities of the urban core. Gloria explains that as a young girl, she would take the train to New York City with her girlfriends to watch a movie or enjoy some leisure activities. When her husband was alive, she was not employed but she still commuted to the city for most of her shopping or to spend some time visiting with friends and family. According to Gloria, "In Levittown, there were no malls, just a post-office, a pharmacy and a very small convenience store. You had to take the car for the weekly shopping and for households necessities." As shopping malls, urban minorities and new immigrants began moving to the suburbs, Gloria's trips to the city became more sporadic and she moved further away from the city. Gloria remembers that, after her husband died, she went back to New York and was disappointed that "it was not what it used to be. There were minorities and crime" which precipitated her return to Virginia. Today, Gloria rarely visits the city, usually "only to pick somebody at the airport. I do not like Washington, DC; it scares me. Too much crime and other [social] problems."

Therefore, the progressive movement away from the city is the outcome of Gloria's ability to move further out (she does not face discrimination from realtors or bankers), as well as, an expression of her identity that is primarily based on social class. Gloria does not associate with the new

22 See id.
23 See id.
24 See id.
residents of the inner-suburbs. Like a large proportion of middle class Americans, she has responded to the arrival of native minorities and new immigrants to the metropolitan suburbs by moving to “outer” suburban communities.

The most interesting aspect of Gloria’s identity is that she has no clear perception of the meaning of “ethnicity.” She does not hesitate to describe herself as “a Caucasian or a white person [or] Italian-American.” However, when asked to explain the meaning of her Italian heritage, Gloria candidly admits, “I am Italian because my parents came from Italy, but I am an American before being an Italian. America is like a melting pot, we are all Americans who happen to come from different countries.” Consequently, the life experiences of both Annamaria and Gloria illustrate the role of social space in forging historically unique, racial/ethnic identities, as well as, the relationship between race/ethnicity and social class. Both case studies demonstrate how the ability to choose where to live, work, and spend leisure time is crucial to developing an identity mostly based on social class. In comparison, the inability to choose one’s spatial arrangements is a fundamental variable in shaping a self identity largely based on race/ethnicity. In addition, they show how prior to 1965, social class and race/ethnicity were largely convergent, as most immigrants and native minorities shared similar social class backgrounds. Those few who belonged to the upper middle class were “encouraged” to embrace a racial/ethnic identity based on the social class behavior of the majority of their countrymen.

As vividly described by Annamaria, immigrants learn that race/ethnicity and social class are strongly related upon their arrival to America. And, to make it in America, “where you come from [even zip codes today] and how blond is your hair” constitute important factors because race/ethnicity defines structural opportunities offered to different groups. Immigrants learn that “to make it” in America they have to become “white.” If they can not change who they are, then they can change what they and, especially, their children are, as demonstrated by the fact that most second and third generation Italians do not speak Italian and have Americanized names. Thus, even immigrants like Annamaria, who came from a middle class background, did not question the relationship between race/ethnicity and social class because the spatial overlap in America helped to forge a personal identity that was largely based on the U.S. mainstream definition of race/ethnicity. This reinforces the stability of the system by fostering immigrants’ acceptance of their social class position. That is, since they can not change their race/ethnicity, then they are encouraged to increase

25 See id.
26 Interview with Annamaria, Sterling, Va. (May 1998).
solidarity within their respective groups rather than forging a potentially revolutionary alliance among members of different racial/ethnic groups whom share similar social class positions.

Second, the socio-cultural superiority of “whites” is reinforced by presenting as racial/ethnic differences what are in reality social class differences. The assumption is that whites have unique and superior endowments that are responsible for their “natural” location in positions of power. Accordingly, lower class whites are more likely to achieve mobility because, as members of the superior white group, they are better suited for higher occupations. Hence, it is to their advantage to foster racial/ethnic alliances over social class coalitions in order to enjoy the fruits of racial privilege. At the same time, immigrants can pursue upward mobility by embracing the same values of the superior white majority, rather than promoting a class identity that transcends the divisive social cleavages that derive from invidious race/ethnic distinctions.

The Way We Are: Racial/Ethnic Identity and Spatial Incongruence

Similar to most first and second generation pre-1965 immigrants, Annamaria and Gloria never challenged the mainstream definition of race/ethnicity or the implied superiority of white, middle class Americans. More specifically, within the close spatial congruence of the urban enclave, Annamaria adopted the ideology of meritocratic individualism that encouraged the Americanization of her daughters. In contrast, due to the loose spatial fit of the suburb of Ozone Park, Gloria assumed the behavior and values of the white, American middle class; her ethnicity is defined only by the Italian heritage of her parents. Therefore, both Annamaria and Gloria endorsed the mainstream values of “Anglo Conformity” and demanded that those Italian-Americans who successfully achieved the American Dream should be integrated into the “white majority.”

The post-1965 immigrants are challenging the mainstream America definition of race/ethnicity by challenging the assumed relationship between race/ethnicity and social class. The post-1965 immigrants increasingly are assuming an identity which is primarily based on their social class status without necessarily accepting the values of white, middle class Americans. Economically successful immigrants can enjoy an upper middle class lifestyle while teaching their children the mother tongue and other cultural activities such as food preparation, ceremonial clothing, and the celebration of national holidays. The latter pattern is the outcome of four phenomena.

First, as a result of the international expansion of the postindustrial economy, a growing number of post-1965 immigrants come from upper/
middle class backgrounds. Second, the racial/ethnic composition of post-1965 immigration waves is dramatically different from previous flows; European arrivals have been supplanted by immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and to a lesser extent from Africa. Third, the preferred destination of this immigration flow is no longer the urban core. Instead, immigrants are much more likely to settle directly in the suburban periphery, where the “poles” of economic growth have emerged. Finally, the new spatial freedom enjoyed by immigrants enables them to live, work, and spend their leisure time in multiple spatial settings, often far apart from each other. This facilitates greater contacts with members of different groups and, by reducing social isolation, attenuates perceptions of discrimination by minorities.\(^{27}\)

The life experiences of Chiara and Santina are examples of the salience of social class as a crucial factor in shaping identity among immigrants. Both are Italians who came to America after 1965. However, while Chiara’s social class background is upper/middle class, Santina’s social class background is working (lower/middle) class by U.S. standards. Not surprisingly, their personal identities are completely different. Chiara has a strong, ethnic identity although she refuses to endorse the mainstream American definition of “Italian” due to its association with working class immigrants from rural Italy. On the contrary, Santina emphasizes that her

\(^{27}\) If a Marxist epistemology is used, it could be argued that Multiculturalism is the outcome of the changed social class background of the post-1965 immigration and an attempt to control social class conflict by promoting race/ethnic tolerance. In fact, Multiculturalism proclaims that to be middle class, immigrants and native minorities do not need to deny their race/ethnic identity. What this implies is the maintenance of racial/ethnic differences within the same social class.

This is fragmenting racial/ethnic solidarity and denying upper mobility to those large sectors of immigrants and native minorities who can no longer count on the support network system of the ethnic enclave. In fact, what Multiculturalism is ignoring is that, for those wide sectors of both immigrants and native minorities who are not middle-upper class, upward social mobility can be achieved only by either becoming proficient in the mainstream culture or using the network system of the enclave economy. Under the mask of racial/ethnic tolerance, Multiculturalism is relegating the poorest sectors of native minorities and immigrants to the lower social strata. These sectors can not achieve upward mobility through the mainstream structure (e.g., getting a small business loan through the bank) and can increasingly use racial/ethnic solidarity. At the same time, alliance within the same social class is avoided because the social “meaning” and objectivity of race/ethnicity is not questioned and, accordingly, differences are maintained. Therefore, Multiculturalism is implementing further fragmentation of society by fracturing ethnic solidarity.
current social class primarily shapes her identity in the U.S. Santina eagerly embraces structural assimilation, in an effort to overcome her modest social class origins, by demanding that she be associated with upper class Italians living in America.

Chiara was born in 1964 in Agrigento (Italy). She is from an old, upper middle-class family. In her household, both parents are professionals from respected families. Chiara is fluent in several languages, holds a laurea degree (comparable to a Masters degree) from an Italian university, a graduate degree from a U.S. university and works for a not-for-profit organization in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. She has always enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and lived "in a polite World, at least until I came to the U.S."

In 1989, Chiara arrived in the U.S. in order to improve her English language skills. After a year, she decided to pursue a U.S. graduate degree because, in Italy, Chiara saw dwindling professional opportunities for herself. As Chiara explains,

"I think that I decided to stay here because I saw that, in Italy, I was denied the same opportunities of professional mobility that were given to my parents' generation and I needed to be free from the social control of my family. In Italy, if you are a woman, you can never be completely free. Do I want to go back? I do not know... I may do it. The problem is that I will never belong here because, in America, there is no place for me, but in Italy I do not longer feel at home either."

Chiara's memories of her arrival in the U.S. are characterized by the discovery of racial/ethnic discrimination. She vividly remembers that after living for six months with her second cousin in the suburb of McLean (Virginia), the decision to leave the secure of her extended family led Chiara to relocate to the urban bustle of the city: "I did not feel comfortable [in the suburbs]. I was sick and tired of people looking at me as an exotic creature and assuming that, since I am Italian, I must cook lasagne every day." Chiara began looking for an apartment and, to her surprise, it was not easy because "[e]very building... was asking for a U.S. resident willing to co-sign my lease or for a certain amount of money in a U.S. bank. I did not have either of them. I was even willing to pay one year of rent in advance, but I was told that it is illegal in the District of Columbia... In the end, I was able to rent [an apartment] because a friend of mine, another

29 See id.
international student transferred about $60,000.00 to my account. Just long enough for the bank to write a letter... then I returned the money." What shocked Chiara was the realization that, for the first time in her life, her social class background was questioned simply because of her national origins.

In America, Chiara realized that she could have two distinguished and yet separate identities. One based on her social status and the other based on her ethnicity. On the one hand, Chiara was upper class and able to pay one year of rent in advance. On the other, she was "Italian" and unable to lease an apartment because, in America, her national origins associated her with modest working class Italians. Chiara responds with indignation, "I am sure that if my father were Kennedy, they would not have asked for all of those documents. It would have been like in Italy, my family name would have been a warranty on its own."31

Before coming to America, Chiara believed that social class distinguished people and she had no understanding of racial/ethnic differences: "In Italy there is discrimination against Southerners, but there you can outgrow your race. In Italy, if I marry an upper class African our children are Italians. Here, no matter what, you will always be different."32 In America, she realized that the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity is an artificial classification based on an arbitrary association of race/ethnicity with specific social class strata,

"I remember feeling overwhelmed by the realization that in the U.S. I was considered similar to individuals [Italian-Americans that] I had nothing in common with just because I came from Italy. We did not speak the same language and what they identify as "Italian" is not what is "Italian" for me. For me it means to belong to one of the oldest cultures in the World, it means kindness toward others, knowing how to drink and eat. For them, it means to be noisy and drinking wine [low working class behavior]. I find their vision of Italy very offensive and, at the same time, I feel sorry for what America did to them. They have never asked themselves the real meaning of being Italian, but just accepted what America told them Italy is."33

30 See id.
31 See id.
32 See id.
33 See id.
It is only after her arrival to America that Chiara realized that she had two identities. Her social class made her similar to the American upper class, while her national origins categorized her as low working class. She did not identify with working middle class Italian-Americans and strongly rejects that identity. However, to Chiara’s surprise, the American upper class rejected her because of her national origins. As she explains, “the American upper class treated me with paternalistic benevolence, not as a peer. I am still offended by their attitudes.”

A few months after she moved to the city, Chiara met her future husband, a Jewish American who has traveled extensively. They married two years later. Today, Chiara lives in the District of Columbia neighborhood of Mount Pleasant with her husband and four year old daughter, Bianca, who is bilingual.

When the experiences of Chiara are compared with Annamaria, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, similar to Annamaria, Chiara discovered her Italian identity only after arriving in America. However, in industrial America, Annamaria was not allowed to choose where she could live and, in the close boundaries of the urban ethnic enclave, embraced ethnic over class identity. In contrast, Chiara can choose where to live in postindustrial America and is struggling to maintain an ethnic identity based on the social class position she enjoys in her country of origin. As she exclaimed, “I am Italian, not Italian-American. I do not allow America to tell me who I am. That is why, I always cross the ‘other category.’ I am myself, not a census category that is imposed on me.”

Second, Annamaria has never challenged the mainstream American definition of Italian. Rather, she endorsed it and struggled to become “White and American.” On the contrary, Chiara is adamant over her rejection of the mainstream definition of Italian. She is resisting ethnic assimilation by basing her identity on the social class position of her family in Italy. Hence, in America, Chiara is struggling with a conflicted identity of being both Italian and upper class.

The different experiences of Annamaria and Chiara can be partially explained by the spatial arrangement of the changing structural opportunities of the postindustrial metropolis. Contrary to Annamaria, Chiara has the choice to resist ethnic assimilation because only within the open boundaries of the postindustrial metropolis Chiara can live with Latino immigrants in the city, work with mostly white middle class Americans in the suburbs, and spend most of her leisure time in a small house she and her husband own in rural West Virginia. Thus, within the loose spatial fit of postindus-

34 See id.
trial America, a growing number of immigrants are successfully resisting the mainstream America definition of race/ethnicity and challenging the presumed relationship between race/ethnicity and social class.

In sum, the life experience of Chiara is an example of how the spatial incongruence of the postindustrial metropolis is fostering an ethnic identity that transcends national origins. Chiara's identity is based on her being an upper middle class immigrant, which explains her frequent association with other upper middle class foreigners. Indeed, she rejects any form of association with Italian-Americans (due to their working class identity), as well as, white, middle class Americans whom she believes do not respect her higher social class background. For these reasons, Chiara feels uncomfortable in the United States, "I may have the same material advantages of white middle class Americans but I am not like them because I come from an old family and country. I am not nouveau rich, I do not need to be abusive to people to assert my class position. That is why I am different from them."

The experience of Santina is an example of how the spatial incongruence of the postindustrial metropolis enables a growing number of immigrants to redefine their identity on the basis of their social class position in America. In fact, Santina eagerly embraced structural assimilation into white, middle class America and uses her present social class status to associate with the same upper class Italians who rejected her in Italy. Thus, Santina is challenging the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity by reshaping her ethnic identity on the basis of her middle class status.

Santina was born in a small village near Naples in 1937. Her family moved to Rome when she was a young girl. To support his family, Santina's father, Carmelo, migrated to Argentina and left his family in Italy. After her mother died, Santina attended a boarding school where she graduated with the equivalent of a high school degree. With the money that her father sent from Argentina, Santina and her brothers enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. In Italy, however, money is not sufficient for obtaining the respect of the Italian upper middle class. In fact, only marrying into an upper class family could ensure such acceptance, especially in the social context of the late 1950s and 1960s. At the age of 32, Santina's frustrated status goals led her to marry an American military officer, only one-month after their first encounter in Rome.

In 1971, Santina and her husband, Michael, moved to the U.S. After a brief residence in the Virginia suburb of Reston, they settled in the Maryland suburb of Bethesda. When Santina came to America, she eagerly sought the acceptance of the upper middle class that rejected her in Italy. In

36 See id.
America, no one is aware of her humble social class background and Santina has been able to recast both her personal and family identity. For Santina, it is so important to mask her social class origins that she usually implies that she was born in Rome by stating that “Io sono Romana” (I am Roman) and frequently emphasizes that she lived very close to i Parioli (exclusive upper class neighborhood in Rome).\(^{37}\) Hence, Santina not only brought with her the dream of achieving upward mobility but also the same forms of discrimination that characterized Italian society in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, Santina hides her southern origins (which in Italy, implies a low social class background) and explains that she lived in an upper class neighborhood in Rome because it suggests that her family is upper middle class.

As soon as Santina arrived in the U.S., she began to pursue a graduate education. She studied in Italy for several years in order to earn a laurea degree (master level degree). After returning to the U.S., she enrolled in an elite, private university in order to obtain a doctoral degree. In addition, she began participating in various cultural events that are organized in the District of Columbia in order to socialize with upper class Italians. She frequently attends Kennedy Center activities and aggressively solicits her Italian acquaintances for invitations to official events of the Italian Embassy and Italian Cultural Institute. By pursuing higher education and living in the suburbs, Santina embraces structural assimilation into the white, American middle class. In the process, Santina has effectively reshaped her ethnic identity in the United States. In fact, Santina is finally able to associate with members of the Italian upper middle class that previously ignored her in Italy because of her modest social class origins.

In describing the identity of Santina, one of the most revealing findings is her disdain toward Italian-Americans because of their ties with working class immigrants. Even Santina’s daughter, Cleo, refuses to accept her mother’s immigrant status because it suggests a modest family background, “My mother is not an immigrant, she came to the U.S. because she married my father, not as an immigrant.”\(^{38}\) Although Santina refuses any formal association with Italian-Americans, she has developed ties within the Italian-American community of the District of Columbia. Indeed, Santina enjoys the advantages of the ethnic solidarity, such as favorable contracts from the Italian carpenters that she frequently employs for renovations to her house. At the same time, her interactions with working class Italians highlight her elevated social status in America. For Italian immigrants, she is the employer, not the employee.

\(^{37}\) Interview with Santina, Bethesda, Md. (1998).

\(^{38}\) Interview with Cleo, Bethesda, Md. (1998).
Santina's relations with the white, American middle class reflect the ambivalence toward her social origins. On the one hand, she eagerly embraced structural assimilation for promoting social mobility for herself, as well as, her two daughters. On the other, Santina has not pursued cultural assimilation as demonstrated by her reluctance to become a U.S. citizen; she waited until after her children completed their college education, nearly 25 years after arriving in the U.S. Even so, Santina strongly emphasizes her Italian ethnicity although she defines it based on her current social class position. She is Italian, but she asserts that she is an upper class Italian because of her white, suburban lifestyle.

It can be argued that Santina has embraced an identity in the United States that is largely based on her elevated social class status. In fact, she is using her current social class position to recast her ethnic identity by socializing with upper class Italians. Accordingly, Santina is challenging the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity because she claims that ethnicity is defined and, above all, redefined on the basis of the primacy of her social class status. Hence, Santina is using her “American” social class position to redefine her “Italian” identity. It should be noted that it is only within the spatially fragmented, social configuration of the postindustrial metropolis that Santina can live in the suburbs with white, middle class Americans and spend most of her leisure time in the city with upper class Italians. Only in postindustrial America could Santina be able to transcend her modest social class origins by redefining her ethnicity along social class lines.

CONCLUSION: CONTESTING THE “OTHER’S” DEFINITION OF WHO WE ARE

As socially constructed categories, the definition of race/ethnicity depends on the historically specific social context that produced them. Prior to 1965, the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity was based on the social class attributes that were associated with particular racial/ethnic groups. For example, the American mainstream perception of “Italian” heritage highlighted the characteristics of poor, working class immigrants. Within the overlapping spatial convergence of the urban ethnic enclave, new immigrants (even those from middle class backgrounds) accepted the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity because they were forced to associate with individuals whose primary shared experience was their national origins.

Pre-1965 immigrants embraced a personal identity largely based on the traditional definition of minority relations. This implies the acceptance of the presumed superiority of the cultural values of the white, American middle class. In fact, if race/ethnicity and social class position are highly correlated, then societal inequality can be explained in terms of racial/ethnic
differences; immigrants who aspire to upward social mobility are expected to embrace the cultural values of the white middle class. Therefore, new immigrants have sought to emulate minorities who have succeeded in achieving the American Dream by promoting the values of the dominant group. This individualistic strategy helps to ensure the stability of conflict driven stratification systems since social class distinctions are portrayed as racial/ethnic differences.

After 1965, the enforcement of new immigration and civil rights laws accompanied the changing opportunity structure of the U.S. postindustrial metropolis. In the process, these trends have fundamentally challenged the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity and its implied, deterministic relationship with social class. As a result, immigrants are asserting that their perspective on racial/ethnic relations must be recognized by dominant groups and institutions of American society. They are demanding that the social class differences among members of the same ethnic group be acknowledged. Also, they are challenging the assumption that minorities must endorse the values of white, middle class Americans if they want to be successful in the United States. These conditions are fostering the emergence of new racial/ethnic identities based on the recognition that social class and the American mainstream definition of race/ethnicity can be incongruent. That is, one can be both a minority and upper class.

As more immigrants embrace a racial/ethnic identity primarily based on social class relations, racial/ethnic solidarity will decline along the socio-economic cleavages of postindustrial America. This can potentially foster the emergence of a revolutionary class consciousness among those groups of old minorities and new immigrants whose main commonality is their social isolation in the inner city due to the changing structure of economic opportunities in postindustrial America. Second, as new immigrants move to the suburbs and the level of poverty increases among the declining white majority, an increase of racial/ethnic motivated violence may be expected in the suburbs following a period of deteriorating economic conditions.

In conclusion, this article has described the generally neglected role of social space in framing an individual identity largely based on race/ethnicity or social class. The fieldwork shows how the American mainstream definition of minority relations is based on a presumed deterministic relationship between social class and race/ethnicity. In the context of the rapidly changing opportunity structure of postindustrial America, the most compelling questions concern how new Americans will define their personal and collective identities, as well as, whether these contested identities will play a role in forming future political movements. As more immigrants challenge the presumed relationship between social class and demand to be
both "minorities" and "middle class" the ability of the American race/ethnic stratification system to reproduce social relation is increasingly challenged. This threatens the ability of Capitalism to reproduce social relation of production. From this context the next crisis of Capitalism is likely to be one of reproduction of social relations rather than one economic reproduction.