Chapter 13
General Patterns of Ethnic Identity

On the surface American society has become homogenized, as regional, local, and ethnic distinctions have faded under the impact of ethnic intermarriage, television, and rapid mobility. However, appearances may be deceiving. Differences in values, occupational directions, lifestyles, religious identities, and patterns of socializing based on ethnic background may sometimes be obvious but are more likely to be subtle and hidden from public view. Nevertheless, ethnicity has played a major role in shaping social structure, patterns of political and economic competition, religion, lifestyles, food preferences, and the processes of cultural change in America.

The vast majority of Americans find that their feelings about others do involve ethnicity to some degree, consciously or subconsciously. And, for many, ethnic group membership provides a community and shared feelings of closeness with others that counteract tendencies toward isolation in mass society.

Because of the pervasiveness of an assimilationist ideology in this country, Americans—especially white Americans of European origin—have been apt to assume that ethnicity is of little significance in the 1980s. The melting pot has been an attractive and potent symbol of our society, and the image of America as the land of economic opportunity for the individual has blinded many people to an ethnic reality that has included discrimination, economic competition between ethnic groups, and resistance to assimilation.

The structures, processes, and characteristics of American society have differed somewhat from place to place. Geographical variations in ethnicity have helped shape these differences. Moreover, the particular ethnic mix of the population in a local area and the ethnic backgrounds of local political and economic leaders are often recognized as underlying characteristics of those places. This atlas has described the ethnic patterns that together have influenced life in different places.

The explanations of specific ethnic distributions have reflected some factors and processes that have been applicable to many populations, such as the roles of transportation connections and people's awareness of employment opportunities in establishing urban settlement locations. In earlier centuries, the perceived quality and cost of available farmland were similarly important.

These have been parts of the geographic structures of opportunities set up by variable patterns in the natural environments and also through the actions of influential people and institutions. Indeed, part of the explanation of patterns involves decisions formulated by people in positions of some power who usually have not been members of the particular ethnic group being discussed. Such people have made and enforced laws relating to immigration and minorities, have invested capital in industrial plants, and have hired some people and not others. Without the specific opportunities created by such actions of others, the distributions of ethnic populations would not have developed in the particular places they did.

Initial ethnic settlements have grown both as a result of chain migration and the participation of ethnic populations in the general net migration flows from rural to urban places, from central cities to suburbs, and from the East and Midwest to the West and South. However, the ethnic distributions would differ little if they were simply the outcome of such general processes.

The distinctiveness of each map is the result of locational decisions and influences peculiar to specific ethnic groups. As immigrant populations arrived in America during different periods, their early distributions were a function of the transportation and economic development patterns during those particular periods of early settlement. Also, the level of skills and education of ethnic populations has affected distributions in terms of the locations where suitable employment or further educational opportunities have been found.

Although difficult to measure, ethnic populations may also have differed in their locational preferences—such as for large cities, warm climates, or proximity to their country of origin—and in their willingness to migrate from established communities. The distributions of some American Indian groups reflect past locations of plant and animal resources, and both blacks and some Indians were forced into areas not of their own choosing. Also, Puerto Ricans and Asian and Pacific island peoples with special ties to the U.S. military through enlistment or marriage to servicemen had distributions determined somewhat by the military. Other groups with high proportions of university students had distributions that were partly the result of patterns of acceptance at specific universities. In addition, almost random or accidental factors have played a role.

Ultimately, of course, the locational decisions that resulted in the 1980 distributions have been made by individuals. Because the motivations and factors weighed have rarely been recorded and most cannot be known, any explanation of the distributions must remain incomplete. Nevertheless, those decisions were made within the larger context of culture and the spatial structure of perceived opportunities.

This book has not been designed to describe the distribution statistically or to test a particular model or theory regarding spatial patterns. Rather, the maps show spatial patterns with a degree of detail that simplifying statistical measures cannot approach. This in itself may make them especially useful reminders of the complexities of ethnic distributions, the dispersal of ethnic populations far from the better-known concentrations, and the weaknesses in some general statements about distributions. Although the interpretations of the maps do make generalizations about the types of places in which certain ethnic groups settled, they have also dealt with particularities of many places.

This final chapter presents some patterns of greater generalization. The book's conclusion is represented by the map and two cartograms at the end—cartographic syntheses that show some of the most significant features of this country's ethnic geography at the national scale.
Geographical Stability and Change

Past research on the evolution of ethnic composition of selected small areas like towns, neighborhoods, and parts of townships in farming areas has indicated that the ethnic character of such places has often been weakened or modified only slowly. In many cases "spatial differences established during the initial concentrations of each group persisted long after the flow of migration had ceased" (Ward 1980: 502).

Stability of Ethnic Patterns over Time

Collectively the county-level maps of older immigrant groups support this generalization of geographical inertia or stability in areas of major early settlements. Exceptions have usually been within metropolitan areas, where suburbanization has often modified the older patterns substantially. Except with respect to blacks in southern counties, this ethnic stability has not been measured precisely. Rather, it has been indicated by the fact that 1980 distributions so frequently showed the same county settlement focuses that were described in the historical literature of a half century or more ago. In a few cases, there have been retained distinctive ethnic characters for over 200 years, albeit with diminished intensity. Also, the 1920 ethnic maps in this atlas, as well as other maps of immigrant groups by county as of 1880 (Bowen 1976) and 1890 (Census 1898), show numerous similarities to the 1980 patterns of the same group. Such stability over time seems remarkable in that it has occurred despite the many generations of ethnic intermarriage and innumerable migrations in and out of communities.

The ethnic character of several large areas within the country also persists. Spanish, Mexican, Indian, black, French, German, and Scandinavian regions remain, usually in areas where initial settlements were made long ago. Although more recent immigrants have introduced more ethnic variety in each area, so that relative proportions of leading ethnic groups have usually diminished, the older patterns are easily evident. However, immigrants since World War II have usually had little effect on the larger regional patterns because their numbers have been small and their settlement has had a metropolitan focus.

Ethnically distinctive smaller areas persist in farming areas of Texas, the Great Plains, and east to Pennsylvania. Also, as a result of the jobs available for unskilled immigrants after the Civil War, there were similar localized ethnic patterns in mining and industrial centers. The Pennsylvania anthracite region, coal-mining areas from West Virginia to Colorado, and iron and copper mining sections of the western Great Lakes still show some special ethnic features. Contrasts in ethnic character between the industrial cities of Chicago to Boston and surrounding rural areas appeared at the same time because opportunities appeared in cities rather than in the countryside. Cities also differed in the ethnic compositions of their populations, depending on their mix of industries and the migration patterns that were established during the early phase of immigration.

First Effective Settlement. Related to the stability of many spatial ethnic patterns over time is the observation that the culture of the first ethnic group to settle into and effectively occupy an area usually became the culture that dominated the area and its landscape — to which later arrivals generally adjusted (Zelnisky 1973). Referred to as the Doctrine of First Effective Settlement, it points out that the characteristics of early settlers have often persisted in areas which later experienced larger in-migrations of people from different backgrounds. This is also a reminder that local political, economic, and social influence and power are not direct reflections of ethnic numbers as depicted in this atlas. Because in this atlas no attempt has been made to treat culture traits, cultural landscapes, or socioeconomic status changes and differences, the notion of First Effective Settlement here simply accentuates the importance of the often distant past in setting frameworks for the lives of people today.

Trends and Recent Changes

Immigration. The ethnic composition of American society has been changing since the late 1960s because immigration from Europe, the historic origin of most American families, declined to 18 percent of our total immigration in the 1970s and 11 percent in the 1980s (Bouvier and Gardner 1986). In contrast, immigrants from Asia and Middle and South America constituted 75 percent of total legal immigration during the 1970s and 83 percent in the first half of the 1980s. Also, three-quarters of the people residing in the U.S. illegally are estimated by demographers to be of Middle or South American origin. With net migration (legal and illegal) estimated to make up 28 percent of American population growth since 1980, it is clear that major ethnic changes are occurring.

Although total legal immigration from Asia has been somewhat larger than that from Middle and South America, immigrants from Asia have represented many distinct ethnic groups. However, most people arriving from Middle and South America have shared a Spanish language and many aspects of cultural background that can bridge and encompass specific national identities. Thus, the greatest single ethnic population change in recent decades has been the increase in immigration of Spanish-speaking people from Latin America.

If immigration continues much as it has during the past two decades, its long-term cultural, social, and economic impacts can at best be anticipated in a general sense or projected statistically from current characteristics and recent trends (Bouvier and Gardner 1986). However, because so many of the ethnic distributions portrayed in this atlas reflect a remarkable geographical stability over decades and even centuries, the 1980 patterns of Hispanic-origin and Asian concentrations are probably good indicators of future geographic variations in the force of those impacts.

Internal Shifts. Since World War II regional economic and population shifts from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West have been changing America's geography. Also, Americans' views of the world have integrated the incorporate Latin America and Asia, as we have become more interconnected with those areas. More and more Americans find themselves looking southwest to the other America or westward across the Pacific.

As Americans have become more suburban and metropolitan, immigrants have also found their best job opportunities in metropolitan areas. However, the mapping of ethnic populations as small as 50 in this atlas has shown that recent immigrant populations have been settling not completely in the larger, better-known cities and suburbs but also to some extent in smaller nonmetropolitan towns and cities.

The locations of the largest and most diverse ethnic populations are being elaborated in response to the westward migration and changing source regions of immigrants. New York City, with its Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, has long been the symbol of our immigrant heritage. It has been the country's premier ethnic center. The greater New York area is still by far the leading focus of immigration and evolving ethnic diversity in the Northeast, but New York no longer dominates the entire country in this regard.

The Chicago area and metropolitan areas in the South have seen dramatic ethnic change. Texas, Florida and Texas accounted for over a quarter of the nation's population growth during the 1970s. (Despite substantial net in-migration from Oklahoma, New York, and several midwestern states, Texas does not appear as a destination on the migration map of whites in chapter 3 because all flows to Texas were beneath the threshold for this particular map).

California and Los Angeles. The greatest ethnic changes have occurred in California, which in 1980 had more people than all the other western states put together. The maps of net
interstate migration depict dramatically the prevalence of California as a destination for internal migrants over the last half-century, and in 1980 the state contained over a quarter of the country's foreign-born population.

Los Angeles County has become by far the largest focus, claiming 32 percent of the state’s population in 1980. Twenty-eight percent of the people in the county were of Hispanic origin, and more than half of Hispanic workers who immigrated to the state after 1970 were employed in Los Angeles County (Muller and Espenshade 1985). Almost 40 percent of Asian immigrants to California lived in that county, too. Adjacent Orange County has also been a leading center of growth in the state, and the several counties of southern California are highly integrated as a functional region with its hub in Los Angeles. The increasing role of southern California in the life of American ethnic communities has been portrayed only partially in this atlas because 1980 represented but one point in a rapidly continuing process.

American and U.S. Identities

The relative salience of ethnic identities as opposed to a nation identity has changed over time, but American ideology now permits people to assert an ethnic identity within the context of a larger American identity (Gleason 1980). A very high proportion of the people who completed the census questionnaire presumably had a strong sense of their identity as Americans, but most were also able to indicate some ethnic identity. Only about 6.6 percent of all people reporting some ancestry were unwilling or unable to identify some ethnic origin other than American or U.S. (An additional 10.2 percent of respondents did not answer the question at all or in the way intended.) Those who identified their ancestry as American or U.S. and then proved substantial variation across different areas. Interpretation of the pattern is difficult because specific ethnic migrations and settlements were involved. Nevertheless, it seems likely that unusually high or low rates of these responses were due to real differences in some aspect of life in the counties or regions represented. Such differences could have been the result of characteristics of the people themselves, as identified by the NORC survey. On the other hand, the social milieu may have been one that especially encouraged or discouraged people’s sense of ethnic identity.

The map permits speculation about the place differences that may have prompted either high or low rates of American or U.S. ancestries. In general high rates were characteristic of the rural interior upland area with traditional ethnic identities.

A private survey, the General Social Survey administered by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), aids in the understanding of people who gave an “American” or “U.S.” response. In 1980 interviewers asked a sample (N=15000) of the U.S. population an ancestry question somewhat similar to that asked in the 1980 census. The NORC survey found that 97.9 percent of the whites choosing “American” or “U.S.” ancestry were at least fourth generation Americans, whereas only 57 percent of the American people as a whole were no less than fourth-generation Americans (Lieberson 1985). Less than 1 percent of whites who immigrated themselves or had immigrant parents or grandparents reported an American or U.S. ancestry. In addition, the survey found that white people who gave these responses were more apt to live in the rural South and be of Protestant religion than were most whites. In fact, two-thirds of the whites who responded “American” lived in the South.

However, a few recent immigrants did report their ancestry in the 1980 census as American (Ballar, Barrist, and Passel 1982). For example, the Public-Use Microsample file indicates that, in California and New York together, 860 Asian Indians listed an American or U.S. ancestry.

Many blacks listed an American or U.S. ancestry. According to the Public-Use Microdata file, the two largest states outside the South, whites were only slightly more likely to respond this way than were blacks. In New York 4 percent of both whites and blacks indicated this ancestry, and in California the figure was 3 percent for whites and 2 percent for blacks. However, in three rural southern states whites were 2 to 3 times more likely than blacks to identify their ancestry as American or U.S., but blacks, too, reported these ancestries with somewhat greater frequency than in New York and California. In Kentucky, West Virginia, and Georgia, from 4 to 6 percent of blacks considered their ancestry as American or U.S. The percentage of people who indicated American or U.S. as their ancestry showed substantial variation across different areas. Interpretation of the pattern is difficult because no specific ethnic migrations and settlements were involved. Nevertheless, it seems likely that unusually high or low rates of these responses were due to real differences in some aspect of life in the counties or regions represented. Such differences could have been the result of characteristics of the people themselves, as identified by the NORC survey. On the other hand, the social milieu may have been one that especially encouraged or discouraged people’s sense of ethnic identity.

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In the less urbanized and industrialized parts of the South there has been no need to differentiate local people by their ethnic background because immigrants of distinctive ethnicity have been rare for over a century. And social status in such communities has been in no way related to one’s heritage as English, Scots, German, or (Protestant) Irish. Only one ethnic distinction was normally made: that between black and white, and these areas have generally had low percentages of blacks. The net effect was a social milieu in which a white person’s European ancestry seemed irrelevant to friendship, jobs, politics, religion, or any other aspect of life.

Outside the South high proportions of American and U.S. ancestries are also associated with areas of less ethnic variety and less industry. For example, the 13 counties reporting over 13 percent American and U.S. ancestries were Pisacataquis, Knox, and Hancock, all of which were exceptionally high in English-ancestry proportions but with little manufacturing employment and no large cities. In contrast, Androscoggin and York counties, characterized during the last century by large-scale manufacturing using immigrant labor, recorded only 5 percent American and U.S. ancestries. Although Aroostook County in the far north is mostly rural with scattered small towns, the separate areas of strongly French and English ancestries within the county have probably tended to make people aware of ethnic identities, reducing the proportion of American and U.S. responses to 2 percent.

The percentage of responses in the categories American and U.S. was relatively low in the Great Plains, especially North Dakota; in the industrial areas of the Northeast and Midwest; and in Hawaii—where ethnic diversity has been high and people have been more conscious of their ethnicity. In Rhode Island, American and U.S. responses constituted but 2.9 percent of ancestry responses, and, in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota, between 2.4 and 2.6 of all responses. By far the lowest value was recorded for people in Hawaii, where less than 1 percent listed their ancestry as American or U.S.

These are states where politics, family social networks, religious organizations, and other social structures have been preheated and have formed to a large extent along ethnic lines. Local people do not necessarily talk about this matter frequently, but it is understood by nearly everyone. Local social structures have an underlying ethnic component that predisposes residents to be aware of their ancestry.
Summary Patterns of Ethnic Composition

Predominant Ethnic Populations

This map is a synthesis of the distributions previously presented in terms of individual ethnic populations. It indicates the ethnic group in each county that was numerically dominant in 1980. It could be argued that because the English-ancestry population was significantly overestimated in the census, as discussed in chapter 1 (Census 1986), a special adjustment of those data would result in an appropriate reduction in the number of counties in which English ancestry was predominant. However, such modifications were kept to a minimum, and the map permits only the most intensively non-English counties to stand out from what is almost an English-ancestry background. If Jewish population estimates had been included with no further adjustment for comparability to the single-ancestry data, Jews would have been the predominant ethnic population in Broward County, Florida, and in Manhattan and Queens in New York City. This map pattern has been interpreted in the sections of previous chapters that deal with the particular ethnic groups.

Regionalization of Ethnic Patterns. This map shows, in effect, ethnic regions within the United States. It adds a dimension to the efforts of geographers and others to define the country’s major concentrations or areas (e.g., Zelinsky 1973; Gastil 1975; Rooney, Zelinsky, and Louder 1982). Maps that show culture regions are clearly efforts to simplify matters of much greater complexity—to isolate major areal variations in the character of American life from the great diversity of people who live within most counties and states and in the country as a whole.

In the case of the map has been designed to illuminate some basic geographical variations in relative ethnic proportions. With the methodology explained in chapter 2, each county has been designated as part of a particular ethnic region. In some cases individual noncontiguous counties make up a set of small regions. Thus, the map locates a German region, an Other Spanish region, Indian regions, and so forth.

There is no agreement as to what criteria are the most useful for defining culture regions, and ethnicity may not be the best criterion in some parts of the country. However, before the 1980 census became available, ethnic identity could be employed only unevenly for the purpose of regionalization because of the lack of ethnic data for whites who were not themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants. The new data permit a type of regionalization that was not even possible earlier.

Ethnic Diversity. Nearly all parts of the country have some diversity in their ethnic identities, but the regions of the country differ substantially in the nature and extent of this diversity. Counties in which relatively few ethnic groups are represented in substantially different proportions have the lowest diversity, as exemplified in many of the less populated and less urbanized counties. Many of these appear on the map as distinctively black, Mexican, or American Indian.

Those counties that had diversity indexes among the highest 2 percent of all counties tended to be just the opposite in character. They were mostly metropolitan and western, because such counties have drawn migrants from most parts of the East, South, and Midwest and from Asia and Middle America. Five of the seven counties that had the most complete representation of the 37 largest ethnic groups in the most equal proportions were in California’s San Francisco Bay area: San Mateo, Santa Clara, Marin, San Francisco, and Contra Costa counties. Other counties that were among the twenty most diverse included Sacramento and Orange counties in California, King and Pierce counties (Seattle and Tacoma) in Washington, and suburban outlying areas of larger eastern cities, particularly New York City, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. Portions of Alaska outside the major Aleut and Eskimo areas have received in-migrants from so many other states that they too were highly diverse.

Ethnic diversity in 318 metropolitan areas in 1980 has also been measured among 15 ethnic groupings, all but 6 of which were calculated from race and Hispanic-origin data (White 1986). In this case larger metropolitan areas were found to be more diverse than smaller areas in each of the four major regions of the country, and the highest diversity was found in the Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Houston areas.

A Geographical Synopsis

The two cartograms at the end of this chapter help summarize broad features of the geography of ethnic populations. One cartogram focuses on the major Hispanic-origin and race groups other than white in the places where they tend to be most concentrated—metropolitan areas of over one million people. It shows in a more precise form patterns that have been widely known in a general sense. From Houston and Denver westward the Mexican-origin population outnumbered whites in every county; in Kansas City and Milwaukque to Buffalo and Baltimore blacks made up very high proportions of minority populations. This pattern was modified in Florida and the northeastern metropolitan areas by Cubans (included in Other Spanish of Florida) and Puerto Ricans. The much greater importance of Asians in the populations of certain West Coast metropolitan areas is also evident.

The cartogram of the ancestries of the people in each state demonstrates some of the most basic features of our ethnic diversity. Because it is based on both single-ancestry and one-third of the multiple-ancestry responses, it represents a close approximation of the ethnic background of any state’s population. The cartogram does not unduly accentuate the leading and most distinctive ethnic groups in states but instead makes visible the geographical mixing of Americans that is part of our heritage. (The numerical data and percentage calculations are presented in appendix I.)

The high mobility of Americans and the intermingling of migrations among states have meant that the numerical dominance of the populations of certain states by historically important ethnic groups has often become weaker or less significant. For example, Americans of French ancestry made up about 20 percent of Louisiana’s population in 1980—less than in northern New England. In New Mexico only 37 percent of the population was composed of people of some Hispanic origin, and Indians represented but 11 percent of Oklahoma’s population.

Of the three largest European ancestries (British, German, and Irish), only the British in Utah reached even half (51 percent) of the ancestral background of any state’s population. German ancestry was relatively strongest in Wisconsin and South Dakota (40 percent), but because the distribution of Protestant Irish (Scotch-Irish) complemented that of the Catholic Irish, people of Irish ancestry were found to be not concentrated geographically at the state level. Therefore, this atlas demonstrates patterns of both the newer and older ethnic populations that collectively represent us, the American people. It has not charted or assessed the significance of ethnicity in America but rather has pointed out variations in the ethnic character of places and shown where specific populations have come to locate. In the case of the populations measured by ancestry responses, the use of single-ancestry data only (rather than a total single- or multiple-ancestry count) was a deliberate attempt to avoid misleading overestimates of ethnicity’s significance. Thus, the size of many ethnic populations has been understated in this book.

The census data on which the book is based cannot tell us how and to what extent ethnic identities are important in people’s lives and the functioning of society or how this importance varies from place to place. But they can tell us something about areal variations in ethnic populations. The distributions raise more questions than they can answer. Nevertheless, they are a fundamental feature of modern America and its heritage.