

# Lecture 12

## Constructionist Approach

- 1.) The Construction of Ethnic and Racial Identities
  - 2.) The Nature of Ethnic and Racial Bonds
  - 3.) Problem of Authenticity
  - 4.) Reconstruction of Circumstances
  - 5.) Logic of Ethnic and Racial Constructions

# Master and Commander

- “The identity I am thinking of is something that hovers between a man and the rest of the world: a midpoint between his view of himself and theirs of him—for each, or course affects the other continually. A reciprocal fluxion, sir. There is nothing absolute about this identity of mine.”

# Overview of Constructionist Approach

- Focuses on ways ethnic and racial identities are built, rebuilt, and sometimes dismantled over time.
- Accepts fundamentals of circumstantialism, while retaining key insights of primordialism.
- Adds that a key dose of activism is needed for the primordial approach

# 1.) The Construction of Ethnic and Racial Identities

# Thick and Thin Ethnicity

- **Thick ethnicity** (comprehensive): ethnic or racial tie that organizes a great deal of social life and both individual and collective action
- **Thin ethnicity** (less comprehensive): ethnic or racial tie that organizes relatively little of social life and action.

# Italian Immigrants, 1910



Italian family doing piecework at home in New York  
**At this time ethnicity was “thick”**

# Italian Community Today

- Ethnicity is relatively thin.
- Some celebrations on holidays, but much less of social life involves ethnic ties
- Today other identities such as gender, occupation, or religion are stronger



North Beach, SF

# Hutus and Tutsis

- In the 1800s, Hutu and Tutsi ethnic identities were relatively unimportant
- Kinship and residential bonds were more important
- Thin ethnicity





# Hutus and Tutsis

- By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, centralization of Rwandan society, ethnic boundaries created by colonizers, and ethnic conflict makes these ethnic identities very thick



# Asserted and Assigned Ethnicity

- **Asserted ethnicity:** individuals do a create deal to create, maintain or change their ethnicity
- **Assigned ethnicity:** individuals use their identities, but individuals do little to shape, reinforce, or transform these identities—other ethnic groups (outsiders) and circumstances are more important.

# Resurgence Native American Identity

- Broad changes in US culture
- Civil rights movement
- Autonomy of reservations
- **Agency:** powwows and other activities used to foster identities
- **Both circumstances (human assignment) and assertion are important forces**



# Internal and External Forces

- Pages 79-80 of Cornell book highlights the importance of agency: people make things happen in their lives
- Agency leads to a “creative” component in the construction of ethnicity, and thus ethnicity is not a “prisoner of circumstances”
- Both internal and external forces matter, and it depends on the particular cases.

# Boundary, Perceived Position, Meaning

- Does assignment or assertion dominate?

Three forces are important:

- 1.) **Boundary:** How strong is the line between “us” and “them”
- 2.) **Perceived position:** How do people see where their social group fits in, and what they are receiving
- 3.) **Meaning:** What types of meaning is given to various forms of assertion or assignment?

# Diversity in Ethnic and Racial Identities

- 1.) Assigned and “thick”: Example of Black South Africa
- 2.) Assigned and “thin”: Vietnamese immigrants
- 3.) Asserted and “thick”: White ethnic groups in South Africa
- 4.) Asserted and “thin”: Italian Americans

# Important aspects of Figure 4.3

- 1.) People can be in more than one quadrant at the same time
- 2.) Various members of one ethnic group might be in more than one quadrant
- 3.) Change occurs often (groups move throughout the scheme)

## 2.) The Nature of Ethnic and Racial Bonds

- We have talked about the comprehensiveness of ethnicity and racial identities and the relative influence of internal and external factors
- Now, we look at the BONDS that holds the group together.
- The COGNITIVE process in which a person recognizes their group is important, but we other forces to make these more salient and strong



# Shared Interests

- Some groups are linked together by political, economic, or status interests (people wanting more).
- People see themselves as having common interests and a stakes

# Pan-Asian Associations

- Many universities and other organizations are seeing the development of pan-Asian groups
- Also linkages in the Latino community



# Shared Institutions

- Groups with shared interests often create shared social institutions, or organizations to achieve desired goals.
- Groups are bounded together through their participation in these organizations

# Shared Culture

- Shared values, rules, ideas, and material items illustrate to people that they are similar.
- Stories and myths within a culture give people a sense that they think alike
- People tend to like people that are similar to themselves.

# Which Bonds are Strongest?

- Which bond do you think is the most important?
- Can a group be strong with only one of these?
- Are these bonds mutually exclusive?

# Constructed Primordality

- Circumstantialism is important, but what about primordality?
- Regardless of the construction of identity, these do have deep impacts on people.
- Ideas or cognitive schema DO have great power over people. (cults and suicide, wars and ideology)
- “Constructed Primordality” is a term to blend the concepts. We need to explain both appeals to the MIND and the HEART

### 3.) The Problem of Authenticity

- It is fair to say that a group's identity are primordial only in the a symbolic or rhetorical sense?
- This invites a huge amount of controversy
- Example of the Maori in New Zealand

# Maori People are Very Proud

- He aha te mea nui?  
What is the greatest thing?  
He tangata! It is people,  
He tangata! It is people,  
He tangata! It is people,  
He tangata! It is people.





## 4.) Reconstruction of Circumstances

- Circumstances are a KEY force in the creation and maintenance of ethnicity. However, it is not the only direction of causality
- Once constructed, ethnicity identities are a form of “social capital” that can be used to reconstruct circumstances.
- Identity can be both a dependent and independent variable.

## 5.) Logic of Ethnic and Racial Constructions

- In review, four forces are important in the creation, maintenance, reproduction, and transformation of ethnicity and race.
- **Interests, Meaning, Happenstance, and Inertia** underlie the conscious and unconscious processes by which ethnicity and race are born, persist, change and disappear.

# Interests

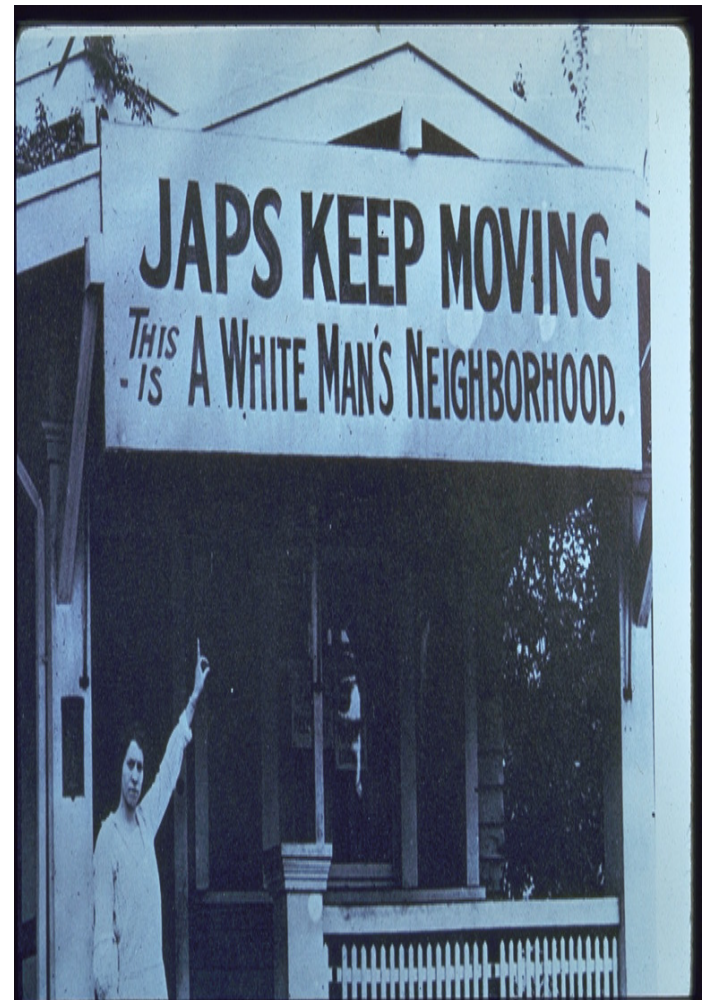
- There is often a utilitarian logic to ethnicity as discussed in earlier chapters.
- Alba:
- “Ethnicity may serve as a principle of **social allocation**; and it may represent a form of **social solidarity** ... to say that ethnicity is a principle of social allocation means that individuals are channeled into locations in the social structure based on their ethnic characteristics ... Solidarity ethnic groups can be regarded as self-conscious communities whose members interact with each other to achieve common purposes.”

# Meaning

- Material, political, status interests are important.
- Yet meaning, “where do I fit in the world” issues are also very important
- What has modernization done to our sense of belonging? Do modern bureaucracies satisfy us, or do we long for more?
- Religion and ethnicity (not so much race) may help us feel connected

# Happenstance

- Sometimes chance is important, or circumstances that are indifferent to the populations they affect.
- Examples: Purposeful labor barriers due to changing economy; recession at time of immigration; living in dense homogeneous ethnic enclaves; Wars



# Inertia

- People are the carriers of collective identities
- Socialization brings people into various social identities, and these are then transmitted across generations
- As a result, there can sometimes be a conservative element to identity change when it is embedded in institutional and cultural parts of life.

# Observations of immigrant groups in Illinois illustrate identity inertia



- Sonya Salamon studied farming communities in Illinois settled in mid 1800's by immigrants from different regions
  - Germans (2 communities, Westfalian Catholics, Friesian Protestants)
  - Irish
  - Swedish
  - Yankees (2 communities, mainly from Ohio an mid-Atlantic states)
- Carefully matched for soil type and other factors that effect farming practices
- Collected data on farming behavior, land tenure, inheritance practices
- Did in depth interviews in subset of each community
- **Here I focus on German-Yankee contrast**

# Yankees express “entrepreneurial” values

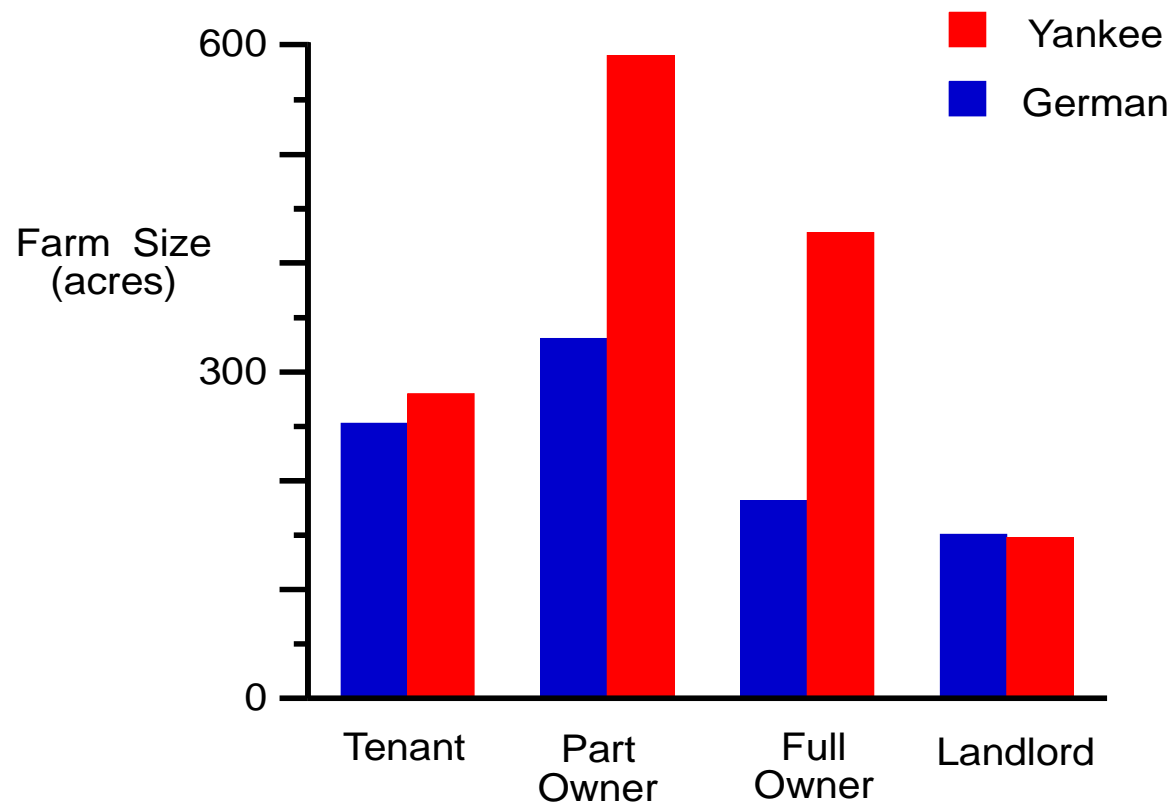
- Farming is a business
- Goal: make money
- Place a high value on education
- Don't pressure children to go into farming

# Germans express “yeoman” values

- Farming is a valuable way of life
- Goal: keep farm in the family
- Don't place a high value on education
- Urge children to go into farming

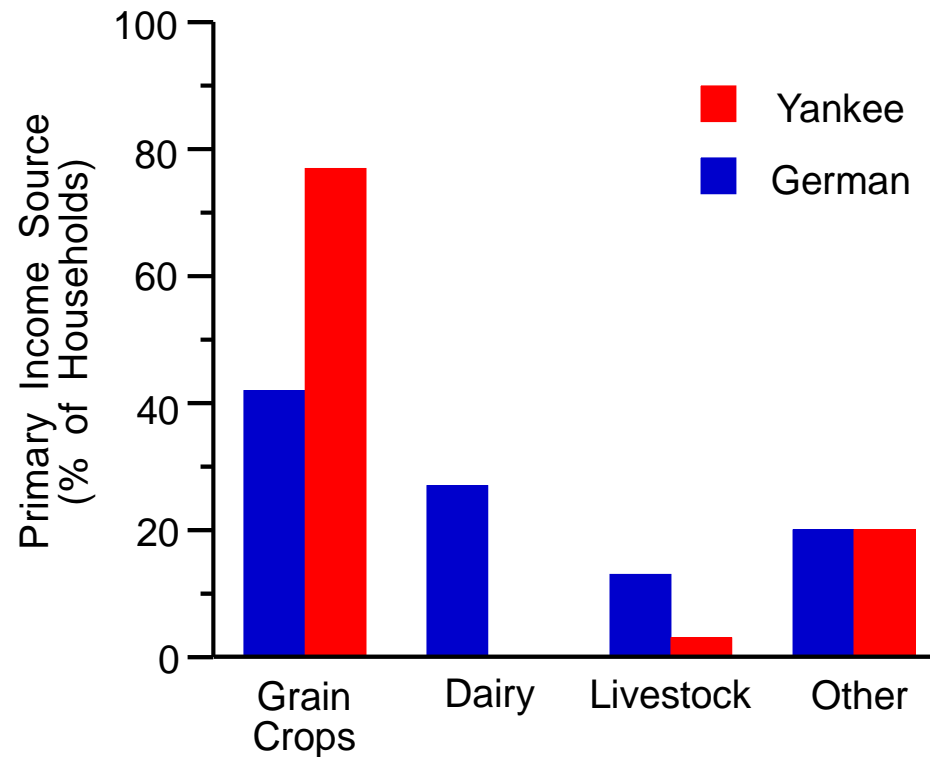


# Germans rent less land and maintain smaller farms

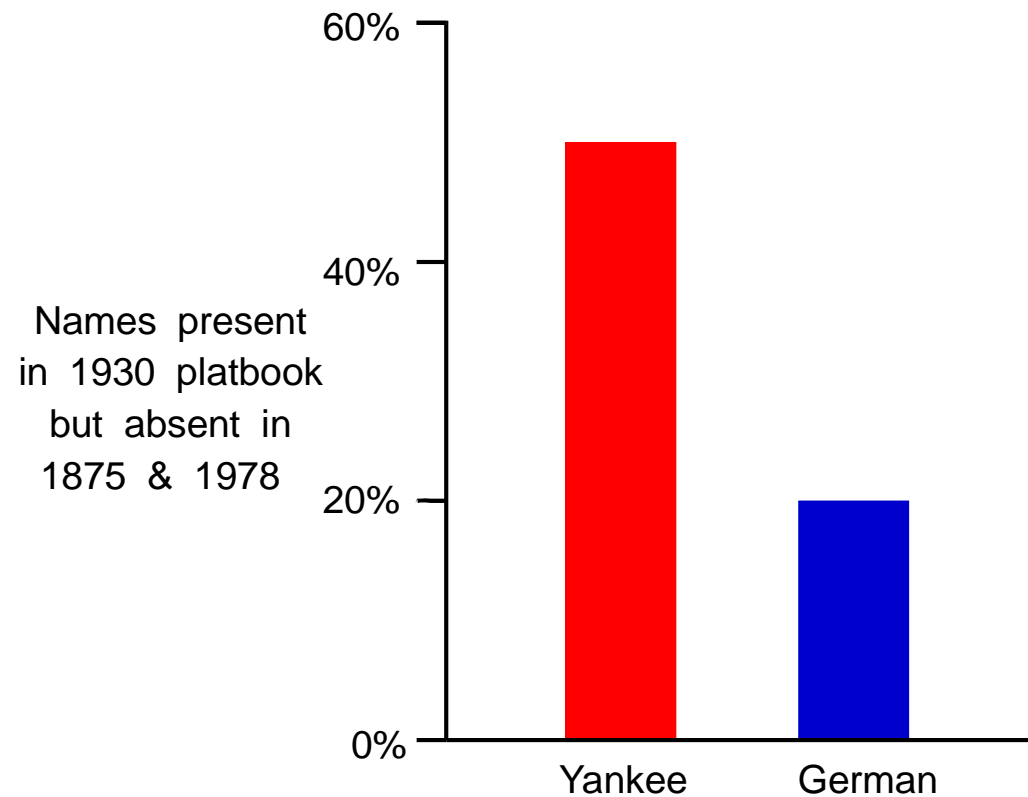


From: Salomon 1985

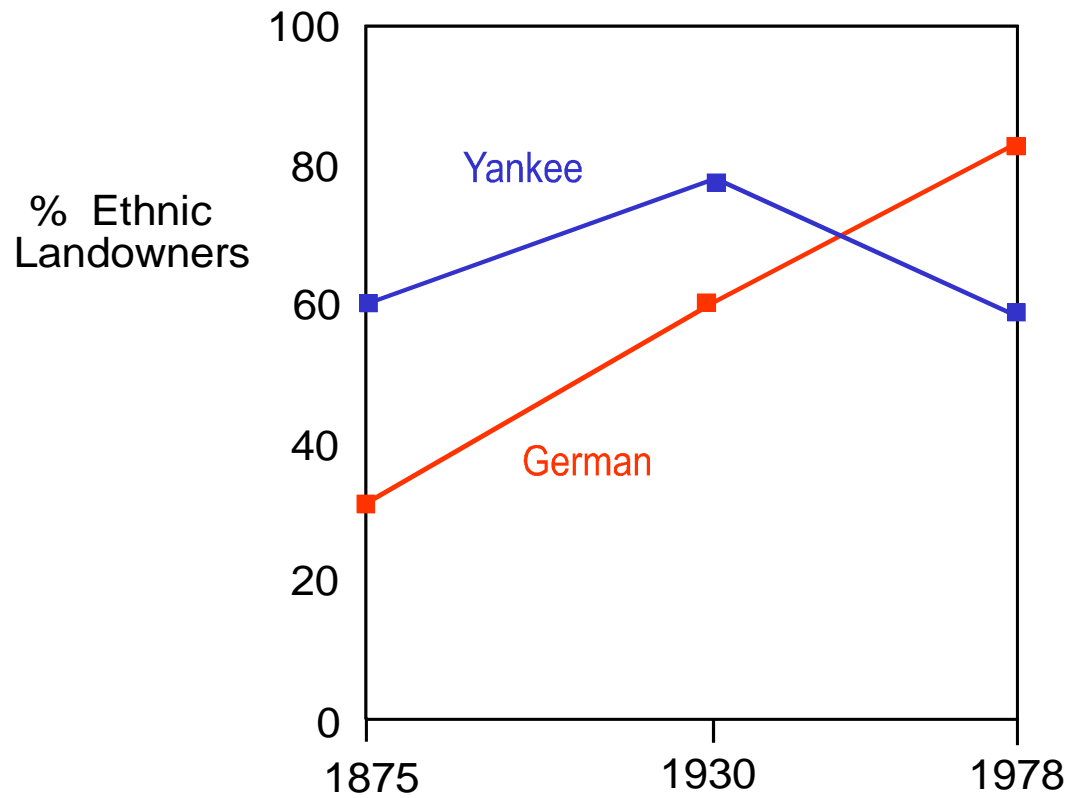
# Germans operate their farms differently than Yankees



# Germans buy and sell land less often than Yankees



# Germans are replacing Yankees



From: Salamon 1985