

MELT. MELTING. MELTED.

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Welcome back, Israel Zangwill. In 1908 a Zangwill drama was the biggest Broadway hit --- ever. Its title introduced a phrase still with us, and that, according to a new Census 2000 report, is beating to smithereens a hardy modernist competitor, "multiculturalism."

Zangwill's play was entitled "The Melting Pot." In the climactic scene, the hero speaks: "America is God's crucible, the Great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand, good folk your 50 groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries... A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians - into the crucible with you all! God is making the American."

Now comes the 2000 Census which says, yes, He is. Diversity is here. America is changed, and will keep changing, in some ways you might not imagine.

The first round of headlines about the Census' "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin" stressed that the Hispanic population had grown mightily and that blacks were no longer the nation's largest minority. The Washington Times front-paged "Minorities Gain Ground on Whites in '00 Census --- Hispanics Pass Blacks in Population."

Do not think that is the end of the story, or even the end of the beginning. The macro datum to watch concerns the category "Non-Hispanic Whites," commonly, if misleadingly, called "Anglos." (Has there ever been another country that describes its putative majority group by what it's not?) In

1990 Anglos made up 76% of the total population. In 2000 the rate was 69%. Recent Census projections show that the Anglo proportion should drop to 52% by 2050. It is that number, a weird one, that is driving some nativists nuts.

Why has the proportion of the Anglo population diminished? Not because their numbers are shrinking. Actually the number of Anglos increased by 6% during the 1990s. But Hispanics grew by 58%, (!) more than expected, to about 13% of the population. How come? The Census isn't speculating yet, but better counting methods and more illegals probably played a role. (And BTW I'd guess the Census has not been fully able to count the large stream of Polish and Irish illegals that came in during the 1970s and 1980s.)

But are Hispanics really the largest minority group? That depends on what the meaning of "are" are. Americans of English descent are not a majority, which would theoretically make them the largest minority. German-Americans finish second. Ah, you may argue, those European immigrations arrived so long ago, they're just plain Americans.

But in that case the largest minority group might be "Americans of Eastern European Ancestry," (AEEA) principally Italians, Poles, Jews and Slavs who arrived near the beginning of the 20th century. Yes, the EEs came from many countries, but so do Hispanics --- countries in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and even Spain.

It comes as a surprise to many of us AEEAs that we are "Anglos." Remember Zangwill wrote about "all the races of Europe." In his time the pillars of the American elite, including the most eminent social scientists, thought that AAEAs, were of inferior races, and even Catholic.

Through the magic of cultural alchemy, all those races are now considered Anglo. From shtetl to WASP in a single century!

Zangwill doesn't even mention blacks in his thundering blast, so low were they on the food chain, beneath mere inferiority. And, of course, Zangwill's hero doesn't bother to list Hispanics, although Spanish immigration goes back to the beginning. And, for the record, in later life Zangwill, the great assimilationist, became an ardent Zionist! (Definition of the time: A Zionist is a Jew who tries to persuade a second Jew to convince a third Jew to emigrate to Palestine.)

So why does "multiculturalism" suffer? Because, as used these days, it typically stresses the idea of separatism. But while separatism may be trendy among foundation-supported "grass roots" advocacy groups, it is losing its war where it counts, between the sheets. The 1990 Census revealed that exogamy was booming. Just 13% of first generation Hispanics intermarry. The figure for second generation was 34%, and 54% for third generation. The corresponding rates for Asian Americans were 14%, 34% and 54%. About half of Jews intermarry. The black rates are much lower, but climbing rapidly. The final 2000 Census results will reveal this pattern more fully.

How to regard all this? With interest. Americans have had a tangled view of racial and ethnic skeins. Only a few decades ago the elimination of legal segregation was denounced by racists as a precursor to "mongrelization." But, when they're called "mutts," Americans think mongrels are cute. When we hear that someone is "mean as a junkyard dog," we're not condemning dogs, junkyards or even meanness, only indicating that those half-breeds are plenty tough, maybe like Tiger and Derek.

From "The Melting Pot" to "Abie's Irish Rose," to "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," Americans have had a, uh, mixed attitude toward melting pottism. And we still do. Some Anglos fear that America will become "a third world nation." In a world where Indian techies are worth their weight in semi-conductors, not to worry. We're becoming the first universal nation.

There are lots of jokers and wild cards left in the cosmic demographic deck. Just recently the principal Mexican demographic agency announced that the Mexican fertility rate has gone below the 2.1 children per woman rate required to replace a population. If you're worried about a great tan tide sweeping across America, you might ask whether anyone will be left in Mexico.

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