

Asians, Jews, and the Legacy of Midas

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In much of the U.S. media today, Asian-Americans are being hailed as the new “wonder group.” Local newspapers seem to be filled with articles about how this student from Pakistan won the spelling bee and that student from Japan won the math contest. Weekly newsmagazines carry articles extolling this phenomenon, and many liberals and conservatives alike enthusiastically promote the stereotype: liberals because it combats the racist myth that people of color are intellectually inferior to Euro-Americans (“whites”) and conservatives because it can be used to promote the idea that any ethnic group can make it if only they work hard.¹ Therein lies one of the negative aspects of this media campaign.

Some have used the seeming success of Asian-Americans as a way to deny the intensity of past and present racism against blacks and Hispanics.² Negative comparisons are made between black and Latino people on the one hand, and Asian-Americans on the other, coupled with assertions that racial discrimination can no longer be an “excuse” for blacks and Latinos, because, after all, Asians are not white, and they have “made it.” Needless to say, Asian-Americans are not the ones behind this campaign. In addition to the negative impact on other minority groups, the latest seemingly positive stereotyping of Asian-Americans may ultimately prove to have negative impacts on the lives of Asian-Americans as well.

Malleability of Racial/Ethnic Stereotypes

Most biologists and social scientists understand that racial and ethnic groups are defined by social, cultural, political, and economic factors much more than by supposedly fixed biological characteristics. Perhaps the most widely read critic of the biological view is Montagu,³ although many have written on this subject. In fact, the flexibility of racial meanings and the contextual variability of racial stereotyping are commonly understood and studied in the social sciences.⁴

In urban areas, street gang alliances and rivalries are not necessarily based on rigid ethnic lines. South African racial laws classified Chinese

people as non-white and Japanese people as white. Classifying the ethnicity of an Argentinian family of German or Italian ancestry that has lived in the U.S. for three generations would be a challenge. Are they Hispanic? “White” Portuguese immigrants in southeastern Massachusetts occupy a position in the community not unlike that of “nonwhite” Latinos in other places. Native Indians from Peru who know no Spanish might similarly be categorized by some as Hispanics. Puerto Ricans of obviously African ancestry are sometimes less vulnerable to discrimination in housing than those people classified as “black” or “Afro-American.” “White” North Americans with one eighth “black” ancestry have legally been considered “black” in some contexts. Much U.S. popular culture treats the rich ethnic complexity of Africa as a homogenous mass and discusses Africa as if it were a country. And while there is some differentiation made among Asians, there is also a tendency to group Asian-Americans into one stereotype, despite the often quite different life experiences among urban Chinese, suburban Pakistanis, Laotian refugees, Japanese, and Koreans, for example.

Contradictory stereotypes abound, especially in popular culture. Black people are accused of being lazy and not wanting to work, while at the same time they are blamed for “taking all the jobs away from whites.” Black males are stereotyped as aggressive and violent and also as docile and without initiative. Jews are accused of being fuzzy-brained intellectual liberals, or even Communists who want to overthrow the capitalist system and who deal in far-away utopias and oppositely, being present-oriented, greedy capitalists who are controlling the capitalist system. Hispanics, too, are subjected to contradictory stereotypes of docility and violence, and Asian Americans have been subjected to racist stereotypes which have sometimes implied docility, sometimes violent criminal gang activity, sometimes stupidity, sometimes “inscrutability,” and are sometimes associated with the All-American ethic of strong families and hard work, and sometimes accused of being clever and manipulative.

In the light of the contradictory nature of ethnic stereotyping and the generally negative effects that stereotyping has on ethnic groups, it might be prudent to be less than enthusiastic if the same media that promotes so many negative stereotypes of ethnic groups should decide to gild a particular ethnic group, or in the case of Asian-Americans, create an ethnic group and then appear to gild it.

Different Functions of Racial/Ethnic Stereotyping

Volumes have been written and debates rage with great intensity as to the causes of ethnic differentiation, racial discrimination and racist ideas and stereotyping. This is not the place to discuss all the nuances of each theory. However, it is useful to acknowledge some of them in a schematic way in order to see to what degree and in what context they might apply to the stereotyping of Asian-Americans and Jews.

Extreme conservatives and neo-fascists argue that there really are significant biologically based behavioral differences among different ethnic groups. Another view with conservative implications is that members of ethnic groups voluntarily stick together. The most extreme version of this view asserts that people have genes that make them want to associate with others who are most like themselves. How affinity towards certain skin tones (which themselves vary considerably within ethnic groups) or other ethnically associated physical differences should be the criteria rather than height, weight, hobbies, etc. is another problematic point. But these writers offer little biological evidence; they write primarily as social philosophers. It is true that many members of ethnic groups have chosen to settle near others from their homeland. Churches, in particular, have been unifying forces to immigrants. But most social scientists would agree that external factors have had the most profound effects on ethnic differentiation, racial discrimination, and racist ideology.

The economy and especially employment opportunities are very important “external” factors affecting ethnic clustering. If the mass migration of an ethnic group, (e.g. Serbs) coincided with the rapid expansion of industry in a particular city, (e.g. East Chicago, Indiana) then one would find a disproportionate number of members of that ethnic group in that city. The “sticking together” theory has other problems as well. For example, the idea that racial segregation exists mainly because black people do not want to live near white people is contradicted by the thousands of black people who do move into predominantly white neighborhoods, and the millions more who have been denied those opportunities by the institutional racism of banks and insurance companies, and by overt racism of some white residents. Restrictive covenants in effect even through the 1950s, forced busing for segregation, gerrymandered school districts, and real estate manipulators are other factors that sustain segregation that come from outside the ghettoized ethnic group.

There are several theories that see dominant elites in society as being primarily responsible for ethnic stratification. Some of these theories emphasize economic factors while others emphasize issues of political control and social order. The economic analyses of Reich, Gordon, and Edwards focus on the ways that a segmented labor market allows employers to maximize profits not only from the “superexploited” minority group, but from the majority segment of the working class as well.⁵ Some of those conclusions are controversial, but certainly an even broader group of social scientists has argued that racism can help employers increase profits. For several hundred years, race-based slavery in the United States proved to be a major source of profits. In any case, whether or not one sees superexploitation at the root of racism, there are many particular patterns of racial stratification in particular places that can be usefully explained within the framework of super-

exploitation theory.⁶

Another standpoint that emphasizes elite domination focuses on scapegoating processes. While scapegoating often interacts with other factors, including superexploitation, scapegoating can have certain political functions not immediately connected to exploitation of labor. Sometimes scapegoating can serve rather specific local functions, such as when a neighborhood politician seeks to consolidate a political base by blaming all neighborhood problems on members of racial minority groups. Sometimes scapegoating can have world-shaking effects, such as the Nazi extermination of half of the world's Jewish population.

The objects of scapegoating can be a segment of the superexploited working class. They need not be, however. Ethnic minorities who are seen as being relatively successful in business are often targets, even when those businesses are small and the actual income of those groups is not very high. Chinese merchants in Africa have been subjected to discrimination and violent attacks. Many of the Japanese-Americans imprisoned during World War II were farm owners. Tamils in Sri Lanka also have experienced discrimination despite the fact that they are not the lowest economic group. It is true that racist oppression based on superexploitation has killed millions of people; the American slave system was unbelievably brutal. But it should be understood that severe racist oppression, including genocide, has also been practiced against groups perceived of as "middle class."

Parallels between Jewish Stereotypes and Asian-American Stereotypes

There are points of convergence and divergence between the Jewish experience in the U.S. (and Europe) and the Asian experience in the U.S. (and Europe and Africa.) One major difference is that Jews are generally considered to be "white" while Asians are usually considered "non-white." This difference is not absolute, however. First of all, many "whites" consider Asians closer to "whites" than other non-white groups, and their attitudes towards intermarriage with Asian Americans are much more liberal than they are towards blacks and Latinos, in general. Furthermore, some anti-Semitism has the character of depicting Jews as "different" in such a profound sense that among some people, Jews really are fundamentally different, perhaps biologically or spiritually, from the rest of the white population. Stereotypes of Jews as greedy, for example, often imply that the greed is much more deeply rooted than the stereotyped alleged flaws of other ethnic groups, such as the alleged alcohol abuse of the Irish or the alleged stinginess of the Scots. But of course, in general, Jews are considered "white" and Asians are generally considered "non-white."

Another major difference is that for every Jewish person on Earth, there are over one hundred Asians. Asians are not a minority group in

Asia. Jews, however, are a minority group in every country but Israel. Yet another important difference is that Asians constitute dozens, if not hundreds of ethnic groups and religious factions. While it is true that Asian-Americans are often grouped together as if they are one ethnic group, they understand quite clearly that Korean, Vietnamese, and Bengali immigrants may have had quite different life experiences. And while it is also true that Jews can be Italian, black, Swedish, Argentinian, or Asian, for example, the overwhelming majority of Jews in the United States are Eastern European in origin.

Jews, Asians, blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics can all be found in both the “cheap labor” segment of the population as well as in the “alien, middle class” segment of the population. There are hundreds of thousands of blue collar Jewish people in the United States, and the history of Asians in the U.S., particularly the Chinese, demonstrates that they too have often had large numbers counted among the blue collar work force. What is interesting, however, are the parallels between the stereotypes of Jews as middle class and the recent stereotypes evolving around Asian-Americans as a “super group.”

Despite the fact that the great majority of Jews in Eastern Europe were poor, the Nazis maintained the fiction that Jews were wealthy bankers and merchants and were controlling the world economy. The fact that Jews experienced persecution and were often forced to migrate did mitigate against Jews becoming farmers, for example. Economic survival for urban migrants often means getting an education, becoming an artisan, or becoming a merchant. But most Jews were lower income and many were also workers. The Nazis did not have a consistent line on the biological nature of Jews. Sometimes they asserted that Jews were located on the biological superiority spectrum somewhere near the Slavic peoples and below Southern Europeans; the implication was that Jews, especially Russian Jews, were mentally inferior to most other Europeans. But sometimes the Nazis implied that Jews were unbelievably clever, perhaps the “smartest” group, but so perverted by greed that they had no morality at all, and therefore were not really human at all, but rather almost Satanic.

Stereotypes of Jews in the United States, both positive and negative, have centered more on the “middle class success story” image. On average, Jewish Americans are slightly more educated than the U.S. average, although it should be pointed out that it was not until the 1950s, after the stereotype of Jews as “middle class” had developed, that a significant portion of the Jewish population began to earn bachelor’s degrees from colleges.⁷ In the 1960s, Glazer and Moynihan pointed out that Jews’ average income was only slightly higher than the national average, despite the stereotype that Jews were wealthy. And today, while anti-Semitism in the black community is a widely spotlighted topic, it should be recalled that anti-Jewish stereotypes, especially the stereotype of Jews as financial manipulators, are strong among non-Jewish whites

as well.⁸

As mentioned earlier, stereotypes about Asian-Americans are very contradictory. However, much of the national media attention, which often has a way of evolving into generally accepted public “knowledge” seems to be focusing more on Asians as the ultra-intelligent, middle class, hard-working supergroup—all “positive” images, except that the door is still left open to classical negative stereotypes of “inscrutability, cleverness, and being manipulators who don’t play by the rules.” Even as much of the media waxes enthusiastic about the new Asian-American “supergroup,” the backlash is already developing.⁹

In Detroit, a Chinese-American worker was murdered by a white racist who beat the worker to death while denouncing Japanese auto companies. In the U.S., autos made by non-U.S. companies are sometimes vandalized. (The irony is that U.S. brands made overseas have generally not been targeted for attack, even as many “foreign” brands made in U.S. factories by U.S. workers have. The vandals’ “alliance” therefore is with U.S. companies, not U.S. workers.) The United Auto Workers union refused to allow “foreign” automobiles to be parked in a union parking lot in Detroit for many months. In the mid-west, blue collar workers are being inundated with propaganda against “foreign” automobiles and “foreign” steel, with the main focus being that the Japanese are winning by “cheating,” rather than by playing by wholesome rules. Computer equipment from Japan has often been put in the same context. In Texas, Vietnamese fishermen have been subjected to violent attacks. In Philadelphia, the city was forced to take down street signs written in Korean because of pressure from “white” community residents, who no doubt would appreciate signs in English should they travel to Mexico or Paris.

In some educational institutions, “middle class” Asians are being used to fill minimum quotas for racial minorities with the effect being that the numbers of black and Latino acceptances are held down. That is because “quotas” are used as the target maximum goal by many institutions, instead of as a minimum goal. As a result, a backlash has developed there as well. Some institutions appear to have developed informal quotas limiting the number of Asian applicants accepted. One begins to hear rumblings and grumblings among some people in some communities, blue collar whites and minorities, urban residents envious of seemingly successful small shopkeepers, “middle class” suburban whites who are puzzled by the academic performance of generally “middle class” Asian-Americans, patients who view their Indian or Pakistani physicians with suspicion, students who complain that they cannot understand their engineering professor who may speak perfect English, but do so in a subdued voice, and so forth. Debunking the stereotypes is another discussion. However, it would be a mistake for those who believe in all people learning to respect and appreciate the contributions of people from other cultures to enthusiastically embrace

the current media campaign to stereotype Asian-Americans as a super-group.

A paper such as this cannot begin to answer many of the complicated questions that arise. If anything, its purpose is exploratory, more to provoke further questions, further investigation, research and debate on these issues by challenging some assumptions that may be taken for granted. Any stereotype has a dehumanizing aspect which may be a minor, secondary point in some contexts, but which may become the dominant aspect in other contexts. Singling people out on the basis of ethnicity and placing them on a pedestal can serve to isolate such people from the mainstream. Of course, the alternative extreme of crudely forcing assimilation is not desirable, since it creates disrespect for the value of the “minority” group’s contributions and the group itself. It also leads to the whole society being denied the special contribution that each of its parts can create. But honoring special contributions does not mean that one has to engage in stereotypes, especially stereotypes that have an almost mystical quality to them. King Midas thought that gold was precious. When he turned his daughter into gold, he realized that living people are the most precious of all. Stereotypes, even “positive” stereotypes, drain the life out of human beings and concretize them into non-human statues. The same “positive” stereotypes that are currently being focused on Asian-Americans have within them many of the negative aspects that were applied to Jews and others who have suffered severe oppression . . . oppression that was intensified by isolation that in turn was justified by their presumed “differentness.”

Notes

¹The words “white,” “minority,” “middle class” and other similar terms are sometimes used in quotes here as a way of denying that they have any real intrinsic meaning other than what is conventionally accepted in given social contexts. On the other hand, they are sometimes not placed in quotes as a way of acknowledging that these words are used by many people and therefore do have a real effect on the world. The use of these quotation marks in this article is more or less random and one should not attach too much significance to their use or non-use in given sentences.

²Recent writings of conservative spokesmen such as Walter E. Williams have emphasized this point, which has been repeated in numerous magazine and newspaper articles. Psychologist Arthur Jensen, who continues to publicly assert that on average “black” people are born with less innate biological capacity for “intelligence” than “white” people, has also hinted that “Asians” may be biologically superior (slightly) in “intelligence” to “whites.” Besides the obvious problems of defining

intelligence, and the serious methodological problems in separating heredity from other biological factors and all of that from environment and social relationships, the issue of defining “race” is handled by Jensen and his followers in an especially imprecise, unscientific manner that implies biology but never quantifies it in a credible way.

³M. F. Ashley Montagu. *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 4th ed., rev. and enl. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1965).

⁴A recent book that explores this is Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. (New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

⁵M. Reich, D. Gordon, and R. Edwards. “A Theory of Labor Market Segmentation.” *American Economic Review*. Vol. 63 (May 1973). Also, David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich. *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁶There have been many examples of this, especially of immigrant groups used as a source of inexpensive labor. A few examples of this are: Chinese railroad workers in the U.S. in the 1800s and garment workers in New York and California today, Haitians in the Dominican Republic, Mexicans in California, Turks in Germany, Palestinians in several mid-East countries, and blacks in South Africa, who are not immigrants, but who do not have citizen status and are obviously a source of extra profits.

⁷Colin Greer. *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education*. (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

⁸Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan. *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1963). Every October, *Forbes* magazine publishes their list of the several hundred wealthiest individuals and families in the U.S. This is a very useful resource; it is clear that Jews do not come anywhere near dominating that list.

⁹A very useful, current work that explores the varied experiences of Asian-Americans is Harry Kitano and Roger Daniels. *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988).