

'WE HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE'

Similarities between Irish, Italians and Jews then, and blacks, Latinos and Asians now

By GEORGE F. WILL

COLUMBUS, AN ITALIAN, ARRIVED IN THE NEW World with a crew of less than 100 composed of Spaniards, Portuguese, some Jews who had been expelled from Spain, some convicts and an Arab brought along to translate anticipated conversations with Chinese and Japanese—remember where Columbus thought he was going. Now, about this new American thing, “diversity.”

Concerning which, Michael Barone says, “We have been here before.” As when Benjamin Franklin, a worrywart, doubted that the Germans who were 40 percent of Pennsylvanians could be assimilated. It is generally wise to believe Barone, the author every two years of “The Almanac of American Politics,” and now of a new book, “The New Americans: How the Melting Pot Can Work Again.” To those who say that traditionally white-bread America has suddenly become multigrain, Barone says: Fiddlesticks.

America, he says, has always been multigrain. The so-called white-bread America of the 1950s was the ephemeral result of a 1924 law that, viewed against the sweep of American history, was aberrant, and was effectively repealed by the Immigration Act of 1965. In 1924 Congress slammed the golden door of America on “the wretched refuse”—the phrase is from Emma Lazarus’s poem written for the Statue of Liberty—of Europe’s teeming shores. So by 1970, the percentage of Americans who were foreign-born, which had been 15 in 1910, was down to 4.7. Today it is back to only 10 percent.

Some say assimilation is now harder because a century ago immigrants were white Europeans like everyone else, whereas today’s immigrants are of different races. But the three biggest groups who came during the 19th- and early 20th-century flood of immigration—Irish, Italians and Jews—were often regarded as other races.

The Irish were called “lowbrowed” and “simian.” Many Jews came to America to flee racist pogroms. Italians were referred to as “swarthy” with “low foreheads,” a “between” race—“whites, degoes, Negroes.” The derogative term “guinea” may have been derived from a West African source of slaves, and in the South, Italians often were semisegregated. In 1891, 11 were lynched in New Orleans. In the late 1930s a sportswriter, referring to Joe DiMaggio, wrote, “Italians, bad at war, are well-suited for milder competitions.”

Barone ingeniously, and convincingly, discerns similarities between the experiences of the 19th-century Irish immigrants and blacks, America’s internal immigrants of the 20th century. He also argues that there are crucial resemblances between Italians then and Latinos now, and between Jews then and Latinos now.

The Irish were driven across the Atlantic and blacks were driven to northern cities when ancient oppressions were aggravated by agricultural cataclysms—the potato famine of 1845–49 and the

coming of the mechanical cotton picker in 1944. They came to teeming cities (in 1850, 26 percent of New York City residents were from Ireland) from rural lives that had excluded them from all but rudimentary education and from cash economies and entrepreneurship. (In 1956, on an Alabama plantation, Martin Luther King met sharecroppers who had never seen U.S. currency.)

For both groups, two consequences of traumatic dislocation were family disintegration and substance abuse. By 1860, three quarters of Boston’s police arrestees or detainees, and 55 percent of New York’s, were Irish. In 1914 half the Irish families on Manhattan’s West Side were fatherless. And in World War I, 10 percent of Irish draftees and volunteers were rejected for neuropsychiatric disorders—usually alcoholism. About 20 years after the great Irish and black migrations began, both groups were involved in urban riots. There were the New York City draft riots in 1863, Watts and Detroit in 1965 and 1967.

Many Latino immigrants, like Italian immigrants before them, bring to America a sustaining trust in family. This is a consequence of deep distrust of institutions of



governance in the countries they left, institutions that trace, in some instances, to the same ruler—Emperor Charles V (1500–1558). Latinos are, Barone thinks, perhaps the most family-oriented group in a society increasingly beset by fraying families. However, Latinos, like Italians before them, were somewhat slow to take advantage of politics. Not until 1962 did Anthony Celebrezze become the first Italian-American cabinet officer.

Many East Asians in the last third of the 20th century were like Eastern European Jews in the last third of the 19th century—a distinct minority in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, and their commercial acumen was resented. Barone rightly calls this “astounding”: By the 1940s, the first decade in which most Jews in America were American born, Jews were substantially more affluent than most Americans. Many Asians, like Jews, are “people of the book” (the Mandarin and Talmudic traditions) and are ascending America’s surest ladder of social mobility, the system of higher education.

Blacks, Latinos and Asians are becoming as interwoven into American society as the Irish, Italians and Jews have long since been. Scholars Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom write that the black middle class is now proportionally as large as the white middle class was at the end of the Eisenhower presidency, when American society was described as predominantly middle class. Male Latino work-force participation—80 percent—is the highest of any measured group. Asians’ academic successes continue to astonish—and to provoke disgraceful admissions quotas to hinder them.

Barone believes the principal obstacle to the melding of immigrants into American life is the liberal elite that regards “Americanization” as a retrograde aspiration that is born of bigotry and nationalistic pride. This is an attitudinal residue from the civil rights and Vietnam protests of the 1960s—skepticism about America’s goodness.

Barone’s riposte is: Lighten up, everybody. Ethnic diversity is as American as apple pie—and pizza, bagels, soul food, tacos and dim sum, and white, pumpernickel and rye breads.