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Comment on Hartmut Esser/2

(doi: 10.2383/32057)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2010

Ente di afferenza:

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by Michael Eve

doi: 10.2383/32057

As Hartmut Esser points out, the theory of assimilation does not have too many claims to being a full-blown theory. Certainly in Park's original version, it is more a simple description of what happens – the observation that, eventually and after a series of stages, what usually happens is that a newly arrived “people,” “nation,” or (to use modern parlance) “ethnic group” tends to become “integrated” as part of the mainstream society, ceasing to be a disadvantaged and separate section. Much subsequent work has also been on empirical issues (for example, the question to what extent recent migrants and their descendants have followed the gradual social mobility of migrants to late Nineteenth or early Twentieth century America), without any very articulated account of the mechanisms in play. Esser attempts to provide an account of the social mechanisms underlying this regular process – and also the exceptions – starting from an account of the rationality of migrants' choices. He focuses particularly on what he represents as a binary choice between investing mainly in relations with co-ethnics or plunging fully into the receiving society. He thus sees the maintenance of ethnic community as a consequence of a series of rational (or hopefully rational) decisions, taken in accordance with the utility potentially gained by investing time, effort, etc. in the ethnic community or the receiving society, the costs of such investment, and the probability that the investment will be successful.

Esser's model is therefore an interesting attempt to see the maintenance of ethnic boundaries as a consequence of strategic choices, given alternative resources

available – rather than just seeing ethnic groups (at least implicitly) as automatically existing. As I have said, the focus is very much on the decisions of migrants. Natives enter into the model as background figures who affect migrants' calculations: for example if they discriminate against migrants in employment, migrants may take this into account in their "investment decisions," e.g., deciding it is not worth investing time and energy in (say) acquiring familiarity with local customs because in any case this will not pay off in employment chances or social acceptance. But otherwise natives do not appear in the model. It seems strange to conceptualize such a broad phenomenon as "integration," with all its aspects, from the labour market to schools, in terms which reduce natives to discrimination/non-discrimination machines or at least to machines who open or close doors to migrants. All the action in the model comes from the immigrants.

Esser calls his theory a "model of intergenerational integration." As I have hinted, I am doubtful whether it could really model the dynamics of integration: it seems more plausible as a model of migrants' strategies and attitudes. But there is also relatively little which is intergenerational in the theory, for it seems to give relatively little space to the second or subsequent generations. Throughout the article [see also Esser 2004] Esser talks about "immigrants" and the logic of their choices. But of course children of immigrants (let alone their grandchildren) are not usually immigrants. The question here is not one of the politically correct label, but of the mechanisms in play and the appropriate terms of the model: the social relations of descendants of immigrants are different from those of the first generation and the problems they face are different, so also the costs, resources and utilities Esser's model refers to – not to mention the "receiving society" and the "ethnic group."

Esser gives only very brief references in concrete terms to the resources and costs he sees as being taken into account by immigrants and their descendants in making their "investment" decisions. But with regard to costs he mentions the costs of acquiring sound knowledge of the local language and familiarity with the culture of the receiving country. However these are problems which are much more prominent in the first generation (or, to a much lesser extent, in the "1.5 generation" of adolescents arriving with their parents). Similarly, with regard to the resources which are seen as attracting people to invest in ethnic relations rather than in the mainstream society, Esser mentions social forms important mainly for the first generation. In fact ethnic enterprise and *associations d'origine* – the main examples provided – are phenomena which concern the first much more than subsequent generations. It is true that among some ethnic minorities in some immigration countries rates of self-employment and small business ownership remain a few percentage points higher

than among natives¹; but there is almost always a sharp drop between the first and second generation, and a widening out from ethnic niches. Likewise with regard to associations of people of the same national origin, rates of membership and of levels of activism are much lower in the second generation: in fact many associations close as the first generation die off, or continue to exist, in spite of low membership, only through institutional inertia and funds coming from local government. The very small number of associations which are started up by members of the second generation (e.g. NGOs channelling aid to the country of origin) tend to be the creation of “well-integrated” and educated people, such as university students or graduates with good ties to institutions in the receiving country – precisely the opposite one would expect from Esser’s idea of associations as a retreat into ethnic closure, possibly as a result of difficulties in making ties with locals.

This concentration on archetypal “immigrants” in a theory of integration is somewhat surprising also because much of both the public and the academic debate is centred around the second generation even more than the first. More crucially still for the model, much work on the social problems associated with the second generation has focused on social forms created with young people of different origins. Many scholars would not see the children of migrants as faced with a choice between investing in their own ethnic community or in the receiving society, but rather in different ambiances of the latter. The idea of segmented assimilation has in effect shifted the debate from the question “will they assimilate (integrate)”² to the question “in what part of the receiving society are they assimilating (integrating)?” The implications of integration into a street gang in the Bronx are obviously different from those of integration into a group of high flyers at an elite high school. In other words, neither “the receiving society” nor the “ethnic group” are undifferentiated units. The choices faced by (say) a child of Algerian immigrants in a *cité* on the outskirts of Paris are not between French society and an Algerian ethnic community (between *rc* and *ec* in Esser’s notation), but (say) between the local street culture and school culture. The option of street culture almost certainly involves forming ties with children of

¹ Even this could be simply a consequence of the well-known tendency (established in studies of the general population) for the children of the self-employed or small business owners to be more likely themselves to be self-employed or business owners. Since rates of self-employment and small business ownership are high among first generation immigrants, we would expect rates to be relatively high for their children as well even just on this basis. Another reason may be that in some cases low levels of educational success among the second generation may restrict careers in employment for others, thus encouraging self-employment.

² American scholars tend to use the term “assimilation” in a broad sense, in circumstances where European scholars would refer to “integration,” without in any way implying a flattening conformity to one, homogeneous national model.

different ‘origins’, including ‘*de souche*’ French, and very probably excludes members of the older generation of Algerians.

Esser tries to incorporate cases of segmented assimilation into his model, but he does so merely as exceptions, where integration does not pay off, apparently not seeing that (especially for the second generation) the basic terms of his model are unrealistic. Much of the discussion of segmented assimilation revolves around rather exceptional cases, perhaps not extraordinarily common empirically. But here this is not the issue, for the more general shift implicit in the idea of segmented assimilation can be applied much more generally: the children of immigrants almost necessarily integrate in the sense of forming ties with locals, but the key to explaining their social and economic trajectories depends on the nature of these social ambiances. This is a logic and a set of choices which is quite different from those imagined in Esser’s model. The idea of a choice between receiving society and ethnic community is a framework implicit in some themes in the public debate over immigration, but it is too external a view to capture the reality of the choices faced, certainly by children of migrants.

But I am somewhat sceptical that the terms of Esser’s model are entirely appropriate even for the first generation. Once again, the problem seems to me that of imagining that the rationality of actors’ choices can be conceived in terms of resources and costs deriving from ethnic community and receiving society as undifferentiated blocs. This is not the situation for most actors: only a tiny proportion of the utilities potentially available within an ethnic group considered as a whole, or the receiving society taken as a whole, are available to any individual member of an ethnic group. What is realistically available is a much smaller gamut of possibilities to which the individual’s personal network gives access. But modelling these choices would require a different logic: not individuals drawing on a pool of resources available in the ethnic pool or the pool of the receiving society. And dimensions such as group size (at least in terms of numbers of people of the same national origin) would be of little significance, I believe.

Esser sees the attractiveness of investing in relations with co-ethnics as depending crucially on group size; he claims that a small group can provide relatively few resources, whereas once a critical mass is attained, it provides more resources, and at a certain point something like self-sufficiency may be attained so that immigrants can live in a self-contained world, having few contacts with members of the receiving society. Once again, Esser talks mainly in very general terms about the resources which co-ethnics provide. However, he refers again to ethnic enterprise. Yet it is not clear in what sense group size counts here. What is conventionally called “ethnic enterprise” is only rarely ethnic in the sense of serving a market of co-ethnics (kebab

shops, “Indian” restaurants, small building companies, and cleaning companies all sell predominantly to natives of the receiving country) so these are rarely crucial as customers and their numbers probably make little difference. It is true that many immigrant-owned businesses do rely on fellow nationals/members of the same ethnic group as a workforce; but this is simply part of the general logic of running a small business. In fact among native-owned small businesses too, labour tends to be drawn from family and kin and from the friends of family and kin; it is doubtful if the logic is very different for restaurants or small clothing factories run by migrants. In any case, the only numbers which might be relevant would be those in kinship and friendship networks; here too, it is difficult to see why the numbers of people of the same nationality (or national origin) should be relevant.

I believe the problem lies in the way Esser effectively portrays ethnic groups as actors – providing resources, for example. I am not entirely clear how Esser defines an ethnic group, or its boundaries. He stresses that many people eventually exit the group through assimilation to the mainstream of the receiving society – a process he sees as being regulated by opportunities available within the receiving society. Apart from this outflow, however, his conception of the ethnic group seems based mainly on nationality. So in Belgium or Italy, for example, “Moroccans” would be a group, “Algerians” would be a group in France, etc. Presumably, if Esser wanted to apply his theory empirically, and wanted to gauge “group size” he would draw on official statistics regarding citizenship, or birthplace or birthplace of parents, at least as a first guide to numbers. I do not think I am distorting his position saying he has in mind a quasi-national definition. The kind of unit which some political discourse refers to as “the Moroccan community,” “the Indian community,” etc. (or equally the idea of a nation, people or race in the nineteenth century sense of the word).

However, such broad quasi-national groupings are not contexts of interaction or “communities” except in an ideological sense (“imagined communities,” as Anderson would have it). Although these kinds of groups are prevalent in the definitions of others, and sometimes important in self-definitions, they are not units of action or interaction,³ and it is unrealistic to think of a nationally-defined group as providing

³ The confusion between the group defined on quasi-national lines and a group offering resources seems evident also in a reference Esser makes to Borjas’ work. Esser takes up Borjas’ idea that the “quality” of migrants tends to decline as migration streams proceed, claiming that “pioneers” are younger, more well-educated and more open to the native society than are the migrants who follow, taking advantage of the resources provided by pioneers. However it would be wrong to assume that data (like Borjas’) on the educational qualifications of migrants of the same nationality in different years refer to members of the same networks or migration chains. The people in question are just citizens of the same nationality, not necessarily members of the same networks. Given this, arrival at an earlier date thus does not necessarily signify being a “pioneer.”

resources. If we take Egyptians in Italy, for example, there are Copts and Muslims, villagers and people from families who have lived for generations in a big city, university graduates and semi-literates. Almost none of the “resources” which are so crucial in Esser’s theory flow indifferently among all Egyptian immigrants, whether we are talking about loans to help a business or even just friendly conversation. So the numbers of Egyptians in Italy (or even in some local area or city) would not give the number of potential partners for operating a small business, an association or any other form of social action. Egyptians in Italy are not exceptional but rather typical: once one looks closely at any nationality (in any time or place), co-nationals in the abstract are rarely either actual or potential partners for action – it is kin or friends or members of the same circle or football supporters’ club, partners in some previous enterprise who are. This is the problem of group boundaries which Blau’s theory of the importance of numbers on intermarriage was unable to resolve satisfactorily. Precisely for this reason, the numbers of people of a particular nationality in a given territory are unlikely to predict (say) rates of business ownership. And in Italy (once again, not an exception), we find high rates of business ownership among several nationalities with only small numbers present, such as Iranians and Egyptians, compared with lower rates in many larger groups.

The mechanisms whereby ethnic boundaries harden or become blurred certainly deserve to be an important theme in sociological theory, and models of rational action of migrants and their descendants may have a part to play, even if a theory of integration cannot be contained only in this. However, the terms in which Esser’s model is cast – seeing immigrants and their descendants as making a binary choice between “their ethnic group” and the “receiving society” – reflect the categories of public debate or common sense perception, not the realities of social action.

As Esser sees, it is important to see persons constructing their trajectories – including the choice to develop more ties with co-ethnics or with others. And I agree that such choices depend on the rewards the alternatives offer. In this sense, it is true that where a migration chain can also offer numerous job opportunities, for example, the tendency to form ties with (selected) persons from the same place will be higher. Networks of this kind, offering considerable resources in terms of employment, are different. Chinese migrants going to Prato, the textile and clothing town in central Italy, known for the presence of a large number of Chinese-owned small workshops, are likely to find themselves in a world made up almost entirely of fellow-Chinese from the same areas (other Chinese as fellow-workers, as people with whom one spends free time, possibly provide loans, etc. So when we are trying to explain the different integration trajectories of different national groups, language competence, etc. consideration of these resources and activities is central. In addition, since the

ties formed during work often overlap with other ties, one may indeed end up with a network composed almost exclusively of co-nationals. And this may even have consequences on migrants' children (once again because of a simple network logic: parents' social ties form the basis, indirectly, for some of the child's ties). However, all this is understandable much more simply just by reflecting on the normal mechanisms underlying the formation of social networks (whether of members of a minority or a majority), without the need for Esser's apparatus. The attempt to deduce the logic of action of immigrants – and, even more so, immigrants' children and grandchildren – via reference solely to the resources made available by the “ethnic community” or the “receiving society” as basically undifferentiated social blocs, seems to me thoroughly misleading.

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2004 “Does the ‘New’ Immigration Require a ‘New’ Theory of Intergenerational Integration?”
International Migration Review 38: 1126-1159.

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Abstract: In response to several special characteristics of the so-called “new immigration” and to the well-known weaknesses of classical assimilation theory, several theoretical suggestions have recently been made and discussed, including, in particular, the “Theory of Segmented Assimilation” and the “New Assimilation Theory.” In addition to the (classical) structural outcome of assimilation, these theories assume two other possible outcomes: ethnic stratification as the enduring social descent of following generations and selective acculturation as the social advancement by using and retaining ethnic resources and identities. This contribution reconstructs these theoretical developments and the presumed structural outcomes as special cases of a comprehensive model, i.e., the model of intergenerational integration, and systematizes sub-processes and single mechanisms outlined by the various theories. Another important result is the identification of conditions and background processes that do not necessarily occur empirically, but that underlie the different theories and structural outcomes as well as the proposed model of intergenerational integration.

Keywords: assimilation theory, social integration of migrants, social mechanisms, ethnic communities, effects of group numbers.

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