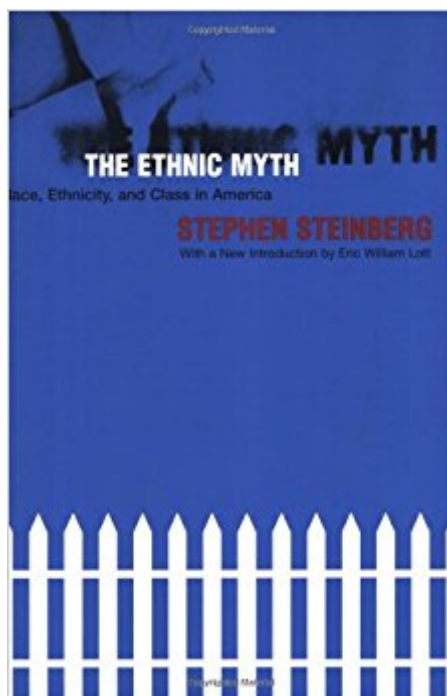


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# The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, And Class In America



## Synopsis

You hold in your hand a dangerous book. Because it rejects as it clarifies most of the current wisdom on race, ethnicity, and immigration in the United States, *The Ethnic Myth* has the force of a scholarly bomb. --from the Introduction by Eric William Lott  
In this classic work, sociologist Stephen Steinberg rejects the prevailing view that cultural values and ethnic traits are the primary determinants of the economic destiny of racial and ethnic groups in America. He argues that locality, class conflict, selective migration, and other historical and economic factors play a far larger role not only in producing inequalities but in maintaining them as well, thus providing an insightful explanation into why some groups are successful in their pursuit of the American dream and others are not.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It is refreshing to read a sociological work that combines elegant prose with a powerful and provocative analysis of a major contemporary problem. . . . The uncovering of the real meaning of . . . differences among American ethnic groups requires a comprehensive historical discussion of the . . . factors that have shaped the ethnic class structure. To launch such a discussion, I cannot think of a better book to recommend than *The Ethnic Myth*.--*Contemporary Sociology*"*The Ethnic Myth* is . . . useful for the clarity and persuasiveness with which it integrates existing criticisms of ethnic pluralism, for the competent manner in which it summarizes the economic forces that shaped the development of America's ethnic groups, and for the robust good sense with which it disentangles

and explains the complexities of race, class, and ethnicity."--The New York Times Book Review

Stephen Steinberg is Distinguished Professor of Urban Studies at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the University of New York. He is the author of several works including *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* and *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*.

This is a highly readable, groundbreaking book that exposes the shallowness of many of the ethnic stereotypes we still hold in America. The core of the book critiques what Steinberg calls "the Horatio Alger myth of ethnic success" which argues that the success (or lack thereof) of ethnic groups in America is the result of cultural values. Horatio Alger was a popular author who wrote books in which the heroes overcame adversity with hard-work, common sense, and determination, i.e. middle class values. American society praises certain ethnic groups as "ethnic heroes" because it is claimed that they overcame so much and achieved success by virtue of having more American, middle-class values than other cultures. Values-based stereotypes include "Jewish people are successful because they value education" or "Japanese-Americans are hard-working and determined, and this is why they are successful". There is no debate that some ethnic groups have been more successful than others or were successful sooner than others, but Steinberg argues (and in my opinion, proves) that these differences in outcome arose from differences in circumstances both before and after they came to America, not differences in cultural values. First, Steinberg gives a thorough history of how America came to be so ethnically diverse (it's not because the American founders valued pluralism and equality for diverse peoples, though this is the myth we tell ourselves). Next, he demonstrates just how pervasive the "cultural values = success" trope is amongst social scientists, journalists, historians, politicians, and regular Americans. He debunks this myth by using primary sources and statistical analysis to demonstrate that groups differed in circumstances (not values) which led to different economic outcomes. For example, Irish female immigrants were more likely to become maids, not because they lacked the pride that prevented Italians and Jews from serving others, but because they were more likely to be single and had to provide for themselves. He also provides a devastating account of how the North and South colluded during the post-Civil War period to keep blacks living in near-slavery conditions and prevent their economic advancement. Steinberg also exposes the reason why we hold onto the ethnic myth: so we can have ethnic heroes to validate our disdain for the unsuccessful ethnic villains (African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, etc). We want to believe that anyone can achieve

the American Dream, but we fail to understand why so many did not and still cannot.

Well written, incisive and designed to make the reader critically think about this issue. I recommend this book to all who are working toward cultural competency.

This book really shows and brings the history of discrimination alive. This is a great book, very educational and it drives you want to to read it.

I like the perspective the author shares. It unveils the real problem behind persistent division in classes and races. The chapters are well developed arguments covering different angles of the problem. I recommend this book. It is a good study.

great

One of the enduring myths about American culture is the mystique about America being the world's "melting pot." This author demystifies this myth and corrects the mistaken image with a welter of hard facts that span the nation's history. The reader will thus leave this book with quite a different picture of American magnanimity towards its immigrants. It is true that the American social experiment in cultural pluralism and multiculturalism is probably near the top of the rest of the world. However, using the rest of the world as a gauge sets the bar of success about as low as it can possibly be set. What about America's own commitment to cultural pluralism? Plus, what is important (but often forgotten) is not the appearance of cultural pluralism in the abstract but its meaning on the ground. In this regard, we discover here that a predictable recurring pattern exists that has endured since the nation's inception. It is a pattern of: conquest, slavery, displacement, genocide, exploitation, xenophobia, intolerance, and racism. And if we can judge by the current national debate on Latino immigration, at least the tail end of this pattern remains in effect even today. Like an elastic band, both the rules of admission and the quantity of immigrants admitted, always have been relaxed and expanded simply to suit the needs of American business and only rarely for any other reasons. Witness, Indian genocide, slavery, selective importation of different European ethnics, and special programs like the Bracero program. Were it not for the fact that American businesses needed cheap labor, there simply would be no "melting pot," or an immigration problem to speak of. Full stop. It was a rare time in American history indeed when immigrants were welcomed with open arms as a magnanimous gesture on the part of the American

people or the government. The more usual situation was that acute labor shortages demanded immigrants in a particular sector. Businesses, always in collusion with the government, then set the rules of engagement so that immigrants were allowed to enter but at the very bottom rung of the economic ladder. This served two purposes. First, it promoted lower wages for all American laborers, and at the same time left the impression that it is America doing the favors rather than the other way around. Making a virtue out of a business necessity, and doing so very much after the fact, and at the cost of those entering the US, American business was able to claim its cynical form of exploitation as a clear victory for American cultural pluralism? But the truth is that such upbeat after the fact characterizations, was only a way of making a virtue (and much rhetorical hay) out of a business necessity. The act of concealing the desperate need for outside labor is also a part of the pattern that has contributed to the myth of the American melting pot. This cynical tableau hardly reflects a principled commitment or endorsement of the idea of an America offering itself up as the last resort asylum for oppressed peoples, or as a nation anxious to welcome immigrants with open arms. On the question of assimilation, I think too that the author has mistaken the normal adjustments immigrants are required to make to survive in a new land and confused them with cultural assimilation. The two are definitely not the same. Likewise, he seems to see both cultural and social assimilation as one-way processes, in which the dominant culture has no responsibility other than to act as a passive receptacle? But again these two are also quite different animals. While a certain amount of cultural assimilation comes about out of survival necessity and through social osmosis, social assimilation, per necessity, can only be a two-way street, and thus requires more than just passive acceptance by the majority population. Not only does it require interaction from the majority population, but also (and this is the point the author apparently missed), the immigrant has veto power over whether he wants to be socially assimilated into the American mainstream. The best case example of how social assimilation works is when an immigrant has to make the choice between adopting a new set of American values, versus retaining the values of the old country. The substitution is made only when adopting a new set is seen as better, adding value to, or an improvement over those of the old country. A much too large number of immigrants today (as has generally been true historically), are opting to forego adopting the new set of American values, seeing the preoccupation with racism, making a fast buck, living in the fast lane and using ideology to distort family values, as clearly inferior to the ones they already have. And sadly, this, as much as anything else, is the reason for a failure of immigrants to assimilate socially. Mainstream America does not seem to "get it" that one-way social assimilation has long since lost its attraction to large numbers of immigrants. It suggests that the tables have finally been turned and that a kind of

reverse exploitation is now in effect. Three stars.

An interesting book itself, but awful physical quality. I opened the book maybe twice before pages started to come out. The binding of the book seems to have used Elmer's glue as an adhesive. Would not buy again.

I had to read this book for a class I was taking on racial and cultural minorities. I think Steinberg makes a few good points but watch out for opinion related text.

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