Assimilation (Sociology)

Definition: Cultural Assimilation (education) from The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

The expectation that all other groups believe in and subscribe to the culture of the dominant group, which is in a position of social or economic power and control relative to other groups. This is based on strong ethnocentrism.

See also
Culture (communication, education), Ethnocentrism (psychology, sociology)

Summary Article: Assimilation
From Encyclopedia of Global Studies

Assimilation is a much contested notion whereby on entering a new country immigrant groups are encouraged, through social and cultural practices and/or political machinations, to adopt the culture, values, and social behaviors of the host nation in order to benefit from full citizenship status. In this view of assimilation, over time, immigrant communities shed the culture that is embedded in the language, values, rituals, laws, and perhaps even religion of their homeland so that there is no discernible cultural difference between them and other members of the host society. This idea is in stark contrast to multiculturalism where ethnic and religious groups maintain strong links to their cultural heritage, and it is indeed understood that these differences contribute to the rich diversity of a successful society.

The most commonly understood form of assimilation is that of cultural assimilation. This involves ethnic groups taking on the cultural signifiers of the host nation. Here minority groups are expected to adapt to the everyday practices of the dominant culture through language and appearance as well as via more significant socioeconomic factors such as absorption into the local cultural and employment community. It is agreed that, in this regard, assimilation becomes easier for the children of immigrants who are invariably socialized and educated in the culture and history of the dominant society from a young age.

Although the assimilation of minority groups into dominant culture has taken place in many societies over the course of history, often over a long period of time, because of the history of migration in the United States, much of the contemporary literature on assimilation has focused on U.S. community and race relations. In the U.S. model prevalent for the first part of the 20th century, new immigrants were encouraged to "Americanize" in order to achieve social stability and economic success and minimize so-called self-segregation between communities. In terms of social relations, it was thought that assimilation, or cultural homogeneity, would lead to less conflict between groups as they came together under one belief system. In economic terms, it was believed that the more diverse groups were able to integrate into dominant modes of production and consumption, the more chance there was for a stable economy. In this regard, assimilation has not always had negative connotations. It was seen as a way to enhance the social mobility and economic opportunities of new entrants into the country and contribute to the social and economic stability of the host nation.

The idea again gained political prominence in both the United States and the United Kingdom in the
1950s and 1960s when postwar immigration into these countries increased. For example, in the United Kingdom the integration/assimilation debate has raged since shortly after World War II, when Britain sought to increase its working population by encouraging migration from its former colonies. Politicians were keen to foster public support for this process by asserting the idea that migrant communities would simply fit into the dominant sociocultural norms of the United Kingdom. To lessen the effects of intergroup rivalry for jobs and other resources, some politicians believed that the assimilation of the new groups into the dominant culture could curb conflict. However, the idea became problematic for a new generation of scholars who considered that it created a hierarchy of citizenship, whereby those individuals or groups who were able to fully integrate could potentially achieve greater social status. These scholars argued that the more able a group was to pass in the dominant culture, the more successful would be their assimilation and the greater the benefits they would achieve. This had obvious consequences for those groups whose ethnicity made it more difficult to fit in. For example, studies have suggested that immigrant communities in the United Kingdom and United States will integrate with more ease if they originate from White European countries rather than from Afro-Caribbean or Indo-Chinese nations.

Despite these debates, how far migrant communities have ever assimilated into the host culture has been disputed by writers across many disciplines—including sociology, race and ethnicity studies, and postcolonial theory—from the 1960s onward. Instead, many writers accept that immigrant communities maintain a significant level of their cultural heritage, and indeed many first-generation immigrants reject the culture of their new country of residence and maintain their previous life in self-sufficient segregated migrant communities. Because of this, governments globally have once again sought to create policies that integrate immigrants into the host nation, for example, Community Cohesion in the United Kingdom. Perhaps this has never been more so than since the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., in 2001 and the attacks on the London transport system in 2005, which generated new policies designed to limit the cultural freedoms of certain, mainly Islamic, groups. Indeed, the terrorist attacks have led to renewed interest in debates on citizenship across many Western nations, which have instigated legislation that requires incoming immigrants to complete citizenship tests. Referring to global events that have seen the rise in nationalism and fundamentalism in both Western and Islamic states, recent literature suggests that we may see a new wave of policies that support assimilation on the global agenda.

See also:
Acculturation, Americanization, Citizenship, Cultural Hybridity, Diasporas, Identities in Global Society, Immigration, Immigration and Transnationalism, Multiculturalism

Further Readings
